

**JOURNEY TO A DOCTORATE: THE EXPERIENCES OF  
FIRST-GENERATION HISPANIC STUDENTS**

A Dissertation

by

MARY LOU GONZALEZ

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Jia Wang
Committee Members,	Toby Egan
	Homer Tolson
	Lynne Walters
Head of Department,	Fred M. Nafukho

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## **ABSTRACT**

Journey to a Doctorate: The Experiences of First-Generation

Hispanic Students. (August 2012)

Mary Lou Gonzalez, B.B.A., Texas A&M University-Kingsville;

M.S., Texas A& M University-Kingsville

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Jia Wang

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Hispanic students who have obtained a doctorate degree (EdD or PhD). The Hispanic population continues to increase in the United States, particularly in the state of Texas. However, the level of Hispanics' educational attainment lags behind that of the U.S. and Texas populations in general. The overall economic impact of low Hispanic educational attainment, coupled with continuing growth of this group, presents a pressing issue for future workforce educators and human resource development professionals. It is critical to understand educational experiences of first-generation Hispanic students to address the lack of educational achievement among this group of people.

Within the naturalistic inquiry research paradigm, I adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to collect rich and thick data that could shed light on the "lived experiences" of six doctoral recipients who are first-generation Hispanic students. Through multiple rounds of in-depth interviews, supplemented by personal observations and multiple email exchanges with participants, I generated extensive personal stories, developed a meaningful relationship with the participants, and discovered the essence of the participants' experiences. Four themes emerged from an in-depth analysis of

interview, pictorial, and observational data: (a) support systems, (b) personal attributes, (c) identity struggles, and (d) socialization struggles. These themes led to discovery of three components that shaped participants' experiences: a journey of support, a journey of self-discovery and self-development, and a journey of identity development.

The findings not only have implications for Hispanic students who aspire to higher educational goals; they point to areas for improvement for educators, human resource development practitioners, and policy makers. Directions for future research were proposed to encourage further research on the topic and issues related to first-generation Hispanic students.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the background of the study and the researcher's interest in the selected topic. It moves to identify the problems, purpose, and significance of the study. The chapter also provides operational definitions of key terms used in the study. It concludes with an articulation of the researcher's assumptions and delimitations and limitations of the study.

#### **Background of the Study**

Educational attainment by Hispanics is critical to the economic well-being of the United States due to (among several reasons) the significant growth of this ethnic group (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2005; Haro, 2004). Hispanics are the fastest-growing ethnic population in the United States and will become the largest minority group by 2025 (Ortega-Liston, 2001). A large increase in a single demographic group can have a domino effect on politics, education, and the workforce.

As the demographics in the United States continue to change (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), it becomes increasingly important to examine the emerging population, Hispanics in this study. As Hispanics are more likely than ever before to attend college (Kao & Thompson, 2003), it becomes important to understand them and their educational attainments.

First-generation college students include a growing proportion of people identified as Hispanic. In order to gain a better understanding of first-generation college students, researchers must move beyond standard means of research that attempt to quantify factors contributing to commitment to higher education. This study is one effort

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This dissertation follows the style of the *Human Resource Development Quarterly*. .

in this direction. By adopting a qualitative research approach, this study is intended to provide deep insights into the lived experiences of first-generation Hispanic students in their pursuit of a doctoral degree.

Leon and Nevarez (2007) argued: “We live in a knowledge economy fueled by sophisticated skills, the kind our universities provide. To sustain our economic base, we will [need to] turn to the growing minority population” (p. 12). The authors called for expansion of minority pursuit of and success in higher education and noted that the lack of educational outcomes for Hispanics would affect the economic well-being of the nation and its place in a global economy that is increasingly contingent on the intellectual capacity of its minority populations.

Since over 70% of all minority students currently pursue higher education at the community college as opposed to the university, it is in the best interests of the nation to ensure the success of minority community college students (Haycock, 2006). Examining and understanding the doctoral journey of students who have succeeded will ensure that the literature continues to expand to provide insights into the experiences and personal meanings that facilitate successful doctoral attainment.

Access to elite group membership (for example, access to doctoral education) is often difficult for first-generation students, given such factors as lower socioeconomic status, educational background or status, and underrepresented and/or minority status (Hoffer et al., 2003). One such way that this access may be restricted is through implicit messages about “who has a place in the academy and who does not” (Kosut, 2006, p. 249).

Unfortunately, although most youth and their parents have high academic aspirations during their participation in elementary and middle schools, many adolescents with minority backgrounds leave the academic pathway before reaching the

college level (Cooper, 2002; Kao & Tienda, 1998). Thus, in recent decades some researchers have moved from simply pursuing understanding of identity and identity development to examining how identity impacts students navigating academic pathways (Ceja, 2004; Cooper, 2002; Cooper, Brown, Azmitia, & Chavira, 2005; Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, Lopez, & Dunbar, 1995). Today's Hispanics population still face barriers that prevent them from completing higher education. One of the barriers is Hispanic parents, as revealed by comments made by two Hispanic students in a study by the Pew Hispanic Research Center in 2009.

Parents expect so much and it gets . . . overwhelming. You have to support your family and take care of your brothers and sisters . . . [and] some people gotta grow up [quickly and] basically never really have a childhood (18-year-old Hispanic female).

Our parents are exhausted every time they come home. They don't have time to be, "Oh, you need help with your homework?" (21-year-old Hispanic male). (Fry, 2009, p. 1)

These comments clearly indicate that the Hispanic population still expresses a high level of concern for family members. Unfortunately, family members cannot help these students to achieve their goals in higher education. This does not mean that Hispanic families do not care but that such expectations can be an additional barrier to education. The bulk of the literature related to minority access to higher education has omitted the voices of the students themselves. It is important to educate first-generation Hispanics and study the success trends of the population.

### **Researcher's Interest**

My doctoral journey started over 10 years ago and I remember feeling that someone would realize that a mistake had been made by accepting me into the program. It bothered me because I believed that I was somewhat intelligent and had already made some strides professionally at a university. I went through several courses and was in a cohort but, due to the distance, I never connected with my peers. It was ironic that my

own journey was tainted with self-doubt and emotional difficulties. Once I finished the course work, I got in “over my head” in my professional role and never progressed to complete the doctorate. At times I felt like my hands were tied. Many times I wanted to call someone but whom would I call? Like many other Hispanic first-generation students, I waited, not knowing what to do. I received a letter that indicated that I should call the graduate office and re-apply if I wanted to continue to pursue the doctoral degree. This was a sign for me. It may sound superstitious, but I believe that life is full of signs and moments that define us. The career-related successes were not enough to sustain me and I wanted more. In my undergraduate years I was on a mission as a single mother. After I got my degree in 4 years, I immediately leaped into a full-time job and an additional part-time job. This was common for me, as I have worked my entire life. I was used to hard work but yearned for the constant ability to learn. I found working around students in higher education was the ultimate stimulation and excitement.

In April 2011 I started working with my chair to become acclimated to hermeneutic phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990). I started reworking on my loosely organized dissertation proposal. I found that my overall understanding of qualitative research was very limited and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach appeared far from my reach of understanding. I marveled at the positive and engaging support that I received from my chair. Her first assignment for me was to detail “My Life” so she could have a reference point for my role as a researcher and guide me with my study. When I saw her again, she told me that my 15-page story/narrative was compelling. I was proud but also intimidated because it was so new to me. On June 3, 2011, when I defended my research project, it was clear to me that I had much work to do to build a solid understanding of the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. During the proposal hearing one of my committee members very eloquently reviewed

the concept of the “lived experience” and how the findings would emerge as I engaged in the study. I was intrigued and very interested in learning. I purchased the book *Researching Lived Experiences* by Van Manen (1990). Another committee member offered me *Over the Ivy Walls* by Gándara (1995). Gándara’s study and extensive research into the educational gap among the first-generation Hispanic population helped others to gain a deeper understanding and insight into educational mobility and educational achievement despite their “desperate environment” (Gándara, 1995, p. xi). My interest in this study is to understand their experiences in their doctoral journey and my own experience as it relates to first-generation Hispanic students.

### **The Hispanic Population in Higher Education**

The latest data on doctoral attainment by all types of Hispanics in the United States indicate that doctoral degrees awarded to Hispanic students represented 5% of all doctoral degrees awarded in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). Researchers have commonly applied the designation of *first generation* to undergraduate students; however, a significant percentage of doctoral students are also identified as first generation. In 2002, 37% of doctorate recipients reported that neither parent had completed a college degree (Hoffer et al., 2003). Although Latina/os comprise 15.4% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), they comprise only 12.9% of college students enrolled in degree-granting institutions (NCES, 2010). As of 2008, 13.3% of Latina/os and 29.8% of non-Hispanic Whites more than 25 years old had a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In spite of increased college enrollment of Latina/os (6.1% in 1990, 12.9% in 2008), the greater issue is student retention and graduation. Research is needed to explore factors related to Latina/o academic persistence and graduation (Fry, 2004). Moreover, research is needed to understand the

unique elements that contribute to success in attaining a doctoral degree by first-generation Hispanics students.

Haro (2004) noted that, although the demand for higher education by Hispanics is increasing, “the programs . . . to accomplish a successful transition and matriculation through the baccalaureate process and on to graduate work remain static and largely unsuited for this population” (p. 206). Haro highlighted that Hispanics who had navigated higher education were exceptions. Therefore, to trace where the gap exists requires following the pathways of Hispanic students in doctoral programs, in particular, the strategic position of Hispanics in the current system of higher education. Hispanic students are grossly underrepresented in doctoral programs (Garcia, 1996; Greer-Williams, 2004; Morales, 2000; Valverde & Rodriguez, 2002). The characteristics of the first-generation Hispanic student population reflect those of students who are more likely to drop out of a doctoral degree program (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004).

The underrepresentation of Hispanics in higher education is compounded by the estimated growth rate of 35% of this population in Texas. The Hispanic population is the fastest-growing minority group in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), and state government will need to meet the educational needs of this population. Review of the latest census data indicates that Hispanics still have the lowest degree attainment at the bachelor’s level at 7.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The problem for Hispanics/Latinos starts in the high school years. Latino youths have much higher dropout rates than other youths. For example, in 2009, 17.2% of Latino youths did not receive a high school diploma or equivalent and were not enrolled in school, compared to only 8.3% of all youths. The dropout rate for Latino youths was nearly twice that for Black youths (9.3%), three times the rate for White youths (5.7%), and more than four times the rate for Asian youths (3.7%; Fry, 2009).



The existing studies targeting first-generation students, particularly Hispanic students, have largely failed to explain individual perspectives and experiences regarding personal educational aspirations. Little information is documented in the literature regarding first-generation Hispanic students who have already committed to college, have persisted to junior or senior status, and have indicated interest in postbaccalaureate education. Most previous studies focus on the first-year experience and risk of dropping out (Nora, 2003).

### **Statement of the Problem**

A review of the literature points to a few gaps in current knowledge about first-generation Hispanics who have aspirations for a doctoral degree. First, while existing studies have examined the struggles faced by first-generation college students, little empirical evidence is available to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities experienced by this population at the doctoral level. Most studies focus on college students' first-year experience and/or students at risk. Motivation to seek higher education is rarely examined, and there is an noticeable lack of literature illuminating lived experiences of students whose goals for higher education extend to a terminal degree. At the same time, however, stories of first-generation students point to the resiliency of these individuals (Rodriguez, 1983; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). Specifically, scholars have found that these students rely heavily on self-motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalized locus of control to persist (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003). Nevertheless, such studies in which documentation of the successful achievements of these students, particularly beyond access to college, are few in number. Furthermore, first-generation Hispanic students often take longer time to graduate with a bachelor's degree and have lower graduate aspirations (Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin,

1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Taken together, disproportionately little is known about the experiences of first-generation Hispanic students who persist to graduate school.

Second, compared to the majority population, fewer minority students go through the pipeline of education in high schools, even fewer in higher education. This trend was clear in the Pew Hispanic Center Report (Fry, 2002) and more recently in a report that indicated a continuing large gap in educational attainment (Fry, 2009).

Third, qualitative studies of first-generation Hispanic students who have obtained a doctoral degree are still relatively few in number. The increase in the country's Hispanic population is not reflected in Hispanics in graduate schools.

The combination of the above-mentioned factors has far-reaching implications for education and the workforce of the United States. Understanding stories and lived experiences of the group selected for this study will be useful in counteracting the dismal educational trends for the future of first-generation Hispanic students.

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Hispanic students who had earned a doctoral degree. The primary research question that guided this inquiry was: *What are the experiences of first-generation Hispanic students on their doctoral journey?* This study is significant for several reasons.

First, Hispanics in America are not getting advanced degrees at the same rate as the general population. This is a serious problem not only for Hispanics but also for organizations that employ them, as well as society in general. The need for human resource development (HRD) as a discipline to be concerned with higher education was explored by Bailey et al. (2005), who delineated growing levels of national concern regarding increasing access to higher education and reviewed issues affecting student

outcomes. Preparing this group to meet the workforce and the political and educational opportunities that will exist for them in the future is a challenge.

Second, this study expands current knowledge about what minority students, particularly first-generation Hispanics, do to become successful and achieve doctoral degrees. Previous studies examined the complex socioeconomic, linguistic, and political factors that affect achievement by Mexican American students (Duran, 1983; Gándara, 1983, 1995; Rendon & Hope, 1996). This study explores the understanding of the lived experiences of the participants' successful achievement of a doctoral degree. Higher education and the role that it plays in HRD has been noted in the literature (Kintzer & Bryant, 1998; Lee & Young, 2003; McLean & McLean, 2001). This study provides a deeper understanding of the experiences and stories that facilitate successful academic outcomes for the participants that will assist others in realizing the same experiences.

Third, the cultural and family demands on Hispanic groups have improved but still do not constitute a favorable setting, nor does the culture provide a foundation for motivated Hispanic students. Many still face lack of support, financial problems, low expectations, and a culture that does not value education. The continuing quest to find a balance in career advancement and family duties is not easy for the Hispanic population.

### **Operational Definitions**

The operational definitions used in this study are as follows.

*First-generation student.* The student who is the first in the family to attend college and receive at least a bachelor's degree.

*Hispanic or Latino.* A person who traces his or her origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spanish-speaking Central and South American countries, and other Spanish cultures. Origins can be considered as the heritage or nationality group. Lineage or country of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the

United States. People who identify their origin as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* are used interchangeably in this study and refer to a group of Americans who share a language and common cultural origins but come from diverse backgrounds.

*Human resource development (HRD).* McLean and McLean (2001) defined HRD as

any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults' work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, or ultimately, the whole of humanity. (p. 4)

*Low-income individual.* Federally defined as “an individual whose family’s taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount as established by the census bureau for determining poverty” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

*Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program.* A federally funded (TRIO) program conduct at 200 universities in the United States. At Texas A&M University-Kingsville the program serves 28 students each year and is funded through federal grant competitions submitted to the U.S. Department of Education every 4 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The program provides scholarly experiences that include graduate school preparation, research internships, mentoring, and intensive academic advising for motivated first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented groups in graduate school (Council for Opportunity in Education [COE], 2007).

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

#### **Assumptions**

The researcher is the primary tool for data collection and analysis in qualitative research. This role results in a dichotomy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). The researcher is human. “The investigator is limited by being human; that is, mistakes are

made, personal biases interfere” (Merriam, 1998, p. 20). As the primary instrument of this phenomenological study, I responded to the interviews by maximizing my time with participants. I collected and produced meaningful stories from the participants.

Assumptions embedded in this study included the following: (a) Participants understood the purpose of the study and answered questions honestly, (b) the applied methodology offered a logical and appropriate design for the study, and (c) my interpretation of the collected data accurately reflected the intent of the participants.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The study was delimited to students who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program. The participants were six first-generation Hispanic students who had earned a doctoral degree. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized to represent all Hispanic students in the United States who have earned a doctorate. Further, participants were delimited to students who self-identified as first-generation students. These people have characteristics that are different from Hispanics who are not first generation.

Conclusions drawn from this study regarding cultural influences must be acknowledged. Not only do these participants belong to the first-generation population, they are also members of a minority. A minority group is defined as “a population subgroup with social, religious, ethnic, racial, or other characteristics that differ from those of the majority of the population” (VandenBos, 2006, p. 583). Robson (2002) addressed the problem of category membership. He stated that areas such as ethnicity are filled with complexity, especially in multicultural societies.

This study was delimited to the Hispanic population. Future research might focus on other underrepresented groups in graduate school. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), although findings in studies such as this are not to be generalized to other institutions of higher education serving Hispanic first-generation students, the findings

may be relevant to other Hispanic first-generation students who shared similar backgrounds and experiences.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter reviews literature related to first-generation Hispanic students. The literature review begins with an overview of Hispanics' educational status and rapid growth in the United States and specifically in Texas. Next, the chapter reviews Hispanics in the workplace, followed by a review of Hispanics in higher education and the support that they receive from academic support programs and their families.

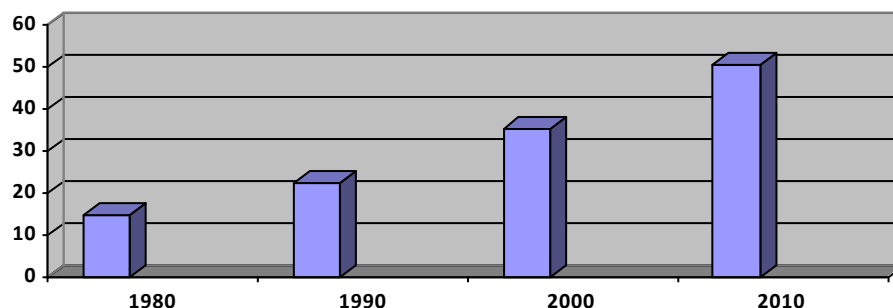
#### **Hispanic Population in the United States**

The growth of the Hispanic population has been greatest in the southwest segment of the United States, but by no means has it been restricted to that geographical region, nor has the growth been due exclusively to immigration from other countries, primarily Mexico. The Hispanic population is a very young population and, therefore, will have an impact for years to come in the United States. Each of these points was recently illustrated in a national newspaper:

Births, not immigration, now account for most of the growth in the nation's Hispanic population, a distinct reversal of trends of the past 30 years. The Hispanic baby boom is transforming the demographics of small-town America in a dramatic way. This natural increase—more births than deaths—is accelerating among Hispanics in the USA because they are younger than the U.S. population as a whole. Their median age is 27.4, compared with 37.9 overall, 40.8 for whites, 25.4 for Asians and 31.1 for blacks. From 2000-2007, the Hispanic population grew by 10.2 million – 58.6% from natural increase. The total U.S. population grew 20.2 million, about 60% from natural increase, in that period. The growth of Hispanic populations in parts of the country where few lived previously has intensified this decade. From 2000 to 2005, 221 counties would not have grown except for Hispanics. (El Nasser, 2008, pp. 1-2)

Currently, Hispanics account for over 45 million people in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), about one of every two people added to the nation's population between July 1, 2006, and July 1, 2007, was Hispanic. This indicates a 3.3% increase in the Hispanic population, making Hispanics the

fastest-growing minority group in the country. Figure 1 indicates the growth (50.5%) of the Hispanic population in the United States for the past four decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).



*Figure 1.* U.S. Hispanic growth: 2010 summary profile. Source: *Demographic Populations*, by U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, retrieved from <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/index.php>

The growth of the Hispanic population in the United States is not expected to slow; rather, it is estimated to continue to outpace the growth of all other segments of the U.S. population. According to statistics reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), the Hispanic population is projected to nearly triple, from 46.7 million to 132.8 million during the 2008-2050 period; its share of the nation's total population is projected to double, from 15% to 30%. In other words, nearly one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic.

A 2009 report released by the Pew Hispanic Center stated that the Hispanic population in the United States is “outstripping pre-census” estimates. It appears that the growth of the Hispanic population continues to exceed even projections of the Census Bureau, which regularly predicts population growth and trends in the nation. Minorities,



now roughly one third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54% minority in 2050 (Fry, 2009).

The 2010 U.S. census counted 50.5 million Hispanics in the United States, making up 16.3% of the total population. The nation's Latino population, which was 35.3 million in 2000, grew 43% over the decade. The Hispanic population also accounted for most of the nation's growth—56%—from 2000 to 2010. Among children ages 17 and younger, there were 17.1 million Latinos, or 23.1% of this age group, according to an analysis by the Pew Hispanic Center, a project of the Pew Research Center. The number of Latino children grew 39% over the decade. In 2000 there were 12.3 million Hispanic children, who were 17.1% of the population under age 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The number of Hispanics counted in the 2010 census was larger than expected in most states for which the Census Bureau released detailed population totals so far. As of this writing, the Census Bureau had released its tally of Hispanics in 33 states. Those states' combined census 2010 total of 38.7 million Hispanics was higher than previously estimated by the Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The overwhelming and continuing boom in the Hispanic population in the United State, as reflected in the cited data, raises a critical issue for national policy makers, educators, and HRD professionals: how to prepare this group academically so they can be successful candidates for the future workforce.

### **Hispanic Population in Texas**

The Hispanic population is growing rapidly in Texas; if this growth continues, the educational problems that are already associated with this population will continue to grow (McCabe, 2000). Murdock et al. (2003) noted the seriousness of the situation in Texas, describing the relationship between education and future socioeconomic status,

which they predicted would impact the economic well-being of Texas. The authors noted that the dramatic rise in Texas's Hispanic population (both immigrant and native) has far-reaching implications. Hispanics' higher-than-average birth rate suggests that this demographic segment will continue to grow at a more rapid pace than that of Anglos and Blacks, even assuming no further immigration. In addition, Hispanics, on average, are younger, which has ramifications for housing, education, and the labor force. In 2000 the median age of Hispanics in Texas was 25.5 years, versus 38.0 years for Texas Anglos. This compares with the median age for all Texans of 32.3 and for the United States of 35.3. Currently, because of its Hispanic heritage, Texas is the second youngest state in the nation, after Utah (Murdock et al., 2003).

Recently released data from the 2010 U.S. census showed significant growth in the nation's Hispanic population. The growth has been greater and more dramatic in Texas, the state with the greatest overall population increase during the past decade. Experts have noted that these demographic shifts pose a challenge for the state and that the state's future prosperity will depend on how Texas meets that challenge.

Rice University sociologist Steve Murdock, also a former director of the U.S. Census Bureau, pointed out that the future of Texas depends on Hispanics because they are the fastest-growing segment of the state's population. Murdock (2010) noted that non-Hispanic Whites, often called *Anglos* in the Latino community, are increasing at a much slower pace than that of Hispanics. Very few Texas counties are experiencing Anglo population growth, while many show a decline. The opposite is true for Hispanics, evidenced by a 65% growth rate in Texas. The astronomical growth in this segment of the population will require specific societal remedies for their success in the upcoming years and beyond. Murdock (2010) stated that, although immigrants account for most Hispanic population growth in other U.S. states, their growth in Texas comes

mostly from a natural increase within an already established population. In fact, most Hispanics in Texas are not immigrants; they have been in the state for multiple generations. There are parts of Texas that have been Hispanic longer than they have been Anglo. Murdock (2010) argued that the assumption that immigrants account for the growth is invalid and noted that closing the Mexican borders would not likely address the problem. Murdock stated that today's Texas population consists of two groups: old and aging Anglos and a young minority group. Between 2000 and 2040 the state's public school enrollment is predicted to see a 15% decline in Anglo children and a 213% increase in Hispanic children. The future of Texas's labor market can be seen in its 15- to 24-year-olds, the age at which most people enter the workforce. However, according to Murdock, in 2008 about 43% of Hispanics left high school before graduating, compared to 8.5% of non-Hispanic Whites.

Furthermore, within 30 years the number of White children in Texas's public schools will drop from about one third to 20%. That does not bode well for the state's economic future because Hispanics are less educated and poorer than Whites (Murdock, 2010). The future of the state is bleak because educational and career achievement among Hispanics is so poor (Murdock, 2010). As Hispanics become the largest ethnic group in Texas by 2015, a gap is forming between youthful Hispanics and aging Anglos, which raises another pressing issue for policy makers, educators, and HRD professionals.

### **Hispanics in Higher Education**

Nearly 9 of every 10 Hispanics say that it is "necessary" to obtain get a college education to get ahead in life, more than any other ethnic or racial group in the United States (Fry, 2009). However, Hispanic students' plans to get a diploma fall well below those of other groups; a 2009 Pew Hispanic Research Center survey found that fewer

than half of Hispanic 18- to 25-year-olds planned to get a bachelor's degree, well below the 60% for all young people. The findings, reported in a survey released in 2009 by the Pew Hispanic Center (Fry, 2009), suggested several reasons for the divide between aspirations and reality, including language barriers, parents' abilities to play an active role in education, and students' desires to help support their families. All Hispanics ages 16 and older are more likely than the overall U.S. population ages 16 and older to agree that a college degree is important for getting ahead in life. The main reason for the gap between the high value that Latinos place on education and their more modest aspirations to finish college appears to come from financial pressure to support a family (Fry, 2009).

### **Barriers**

The current trend that increases national levels of concern regarding success in higher education and upward mobility specifically of American Hispanics is the large demographic shift in this population (Boswell, 2004; Haro, 2004; Kochhar & Tafoya, 2005; Laden, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Haro (2004) shared his concern about population projections, warning that "a relentless swelling tide of Latino (Hispanic) students is approaching higher education in America" (p. 206). His research indicates that social and cultural conditions make it difficult for Hispanic students to gain access to and to succeed in high-ranking colleges. Cultural and ethnic influences are important considerations in an examination of motivation for participating in higher education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). All too often, the barriers associated with being first-generation Hispanic students, combined with overall low educational attainment in higher education, perpetuate a cycle for poor people who feel that they have no alternatives.

Terenzini et al. (1994) noted that the transition from high school or work to college is a complex phenomenon that may be viewed as “a highly interrelated, web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic and organizational pulls and pushes” (p. 61). While many Hispanic doctoral students come with obstacles similar to those faced by their White counterparts, such as differing interest, strengths/weaknesses, and personal responsibilities, Hispanic students’ problems are compounded by the family’s lack of academic history, financial support, or understanding of the graduate academic culture (Valverde & Rodriguez, 2002).

A report published by the Educational Testing Services of Princeton, New Jersey, (Carnevale & Fry, 2000) projected that Hispanic students would make up 15.4% of U.S. college enrollment in the year 2015, an increase of 10.6% from 1995, and that Hispanic student enrollment would increase from 1.4 million to 2.5 million on U.S. college campuses during that 20-year period. Educational aspirations are currently universally high for all racial and ethnic groups; however, there remain substantial gaps between more advantaged groups and Hispanics (Kao & Thompson, 2003). To complicate the achievement of higher education by first-generation students, research suggests that they are more likely to attend a community college at some point during their academic career, as well as to report more debt upon degree completion (Hoffer et al., 2003).

Another barrier to pursuit of higher education is associated with the costs. Burd (2002) indicated that rising college costs prevented 170,000 top high school graduates from low- and moderate-income families from entering college that fall. The main reason for low-income students not being able to afford college is the shortage of federal and state grants. This means that families are responsible for a larger share of costs through loans, work-study, and their own paychecks and savings (Burd, 2002). Low-income students who attend a public 4-year college must pay about \$7,500, or two thirds

of the institutional costs each year, after all grants are dispersed. These costs can be prohibitive for families whose income is \$25,000 or less (Burd, 2002). Obviously, increases in the Pell Grant and incentives for states to increase their own need-based aid programs and for institutions to slow their tuition and fee increases are sorely needed. In this troubling economy, costs at educational institutions increase each year. This is a vicious cycle for students from first-generation Hispanic students and others who aspire to enter an institution of higher education.

Although researchers agree that high aspirations are needed to achieve goals in the future, there is controversy regarding whether they can capture the differences between adolescents who seriously make plans and those who simply report wishful thinking without knowing what is required to accomplish the goal (Gándara, O'Hara, & Gutierrez, 2004; Kao & Thompson, 2003). The latter is more indicative of a precursor to setting expectations, as opposed to expressing aspirations. Although students may be eligible to attend a university, not all choose to follow a 4-year college pathway immediately after high school. Those who may aspire to attend to a 4-year university face challenges (e.g., change in familial structure or financial hardship) that may steer their pathway in a new direction. Students deal with challenges and opportunities as they arise, keeping in mind their values and their priorities.

For low-income Latino students, constructing a positive academic identity may be quite challenging. The aspirations literature illustrates that, although Latino students' future aspirations are high, the majority of these students do not make it through the educational system to higher education (Gándara, Larson, Mehan, & Rumberger, 1998; Kao & Tienda, 1998). Specifically, academic "pipeline" data for Chicano students shows that, of every 100 elementary school students, 46 earn a high school diploma, 26 go to college (17 to community college, 9 to a 4-year university), 8 graduate with a bachelor's

degree, 2 earn a graduate or professional degree, and 0.2 earn a doctoral degree (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). This is alarming, given that the Latino population at 14.2% is now the nation's largest racial/ethnic minority group (Valencia, 2002). The demographics of the Latino population and persistent lack of diversity in college campuses highlights the growing importance not only of documenting Latino students' academic pathways but also of understanding their identity formation as they create possibilities for the future. Special attention is needed in understanding Latino students' challenges and resources to develop and/or redefine support systems (e.g., college access programs) that may reverse these trends.

### **Persistence**

Hispanic students' lack of persistence in education starts at the secondary level. First-generation Hispanic youth have higher dropout rates than any other group prior to entering an institution of higher education (Fry, 2009).

Latino youths have much higher dropout rates than other youths. In 2009, 17.2% of Latino youths did not receive a high school diploma or equivalent and were not enrolled in school, compared to only 8.3% of all youths. The dropout rate for Latino youths was nearly twice the rate for Black youths (9.3%), three times the rate for White youths (5.7%), and more than four times the rate for Asian youths (3.7%; Fry, 2009). Correspondingly, the high school completion rate among Latino youths ages 18 to 24 was much lower than average—77.2%, compared to 89.7% for all youths. Among those who graduated from high school, only 38.8% of Latinos ages 16 to 24 were enrolled in college, lower than the rates for all youths (45.6%), Whites (46.4%), Blacks (43.1%), and Asians (66.0%; Fry, 2009).

Persistence and resilience are addressed in outreach programs in higher education settings. In a longitudinal study, Ishitani (2003) examined the effects of being a first-generation student on attrition. Results indicated that first-generation college students

were more likely than their counterparts to withdraw from school over time. After controlling for factors such as high school grade point average (GPA), family income, race, and gender, the risk of attrition in the first year at the university for those students whose parents did not graduate from college was 71% higher than that for students with two college-educated parents. Ishitani stated that merely offering first-generation students opportunities to attend college might not guarantee success in the academic environment. The high attrition rate for Hispanics in higher education speaks to the presence of other indicators affecting Hispanic student success in higher education.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) suggested that first-generation students made choices based on different worldviews than continuing-generation students; these views may have been unique to their own groups and thus framed what students perceived and valued about college. The lower educational aspirations of first-generation students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) could impact persistence within the higher education environment. These findings highlight the importance of understanding factors and unique experiences that promote formation of educational aspiration and persistence.

### **Hispanics in Graduate School**

Compounding the dismal representation of Hispanics in higher education is the even lower educational success rate by first-generation Hispanic students in graduate and doctoral education. The literature on this population covers only a handful of studies. These include studies in 1992, 1993, 1995 by Patricia Gándara, who was one of the first scholars to examine the experience of Latinos who attained a terminal degree. Gándara found that strong emotional support, particularly from mothers, in addition to attending highly integrated schools, was critical to the students' success.

Lopez (2007) observed that although higher education institutions have increased efforts to proactively recruit, enroll, and graduate Latino students, educational disparities



between Latino students and their White counterparts continue. Lopez conducted a study at a large, predominantly White college to determine the dimensions of success for graduating Latino students within that environment. Lopez identified eight dimensions of success: being involved, the family's role, the role of campus leaders and mentors, embracing academics, and the desire to be successful. According to Lopez, "A Latino's worldview is comprised of many complex factors, but at the nucleus of the individual is the family" (p. 19). This suggests that the family's role in graduate school is a primary persistence factor for Latino college students.

Fuerth (2008) studied a group of successful Latina doctoral students and identified challenges and factors that led to their success. The participants shared the following challenging experiences: (a) having a lack of confidence in their abilities, (b) feeling isolated, (c) experiencing difficulty with time management, and (d) being responsible for caring for their children. Conversely, some of those factors that led to success were (a) family expectations, (b) an innate desire to finish the program, (c) feeling integrated, (d) feeling competent, (e) having a sense of purpose and commitment to education, (f) support from mentors, role-models, faculty and family, and (g) having financial assistance. One participant mentioned that it was challenging to balance her family, work, and school responsibilities.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* ("Projections," 2005), students from underrepresented groups in graduate education (American Indian and Alaskan Native, Black American, and Hispanic) comprise 26.0% of the U.S. population. Yet, underrepresented groups enroll at a rate of 13.7%, compared to 69.0% for the majority group (Whites). Also, underrepresented students account for 10.8% of the doctoral degrees awarded, in contrast to the 79.3% awarded to majority students. Thus, students underrepresented in graduate education are not in careers for which a doctorate is

required. The careers most often selected by majority students with doctoral degrees (77.0%) are in academia: professors, deans, department chairs, upper-level administrators, and researchers. However, only 18.3% of underrepresented students with doctoral degrees plan to select careers in higher education.

One effort to assist in graduate attainment was made by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, which in 1996 funded the Hispanic Border Leadership Institute (HBLI) in response to low representation of Hispanics with doctorate. Four universities along the U.S./Mexican border were offered 30 fellowships in educational administration. From the experiences of the first cohort, the institutional support model was created. The process has critical elements such as financial support, emotional/social support, mentorship, and technical support, which contributed to eight of the nine doctoral students who completed their degrees. HBLI was funded over 15 years ago and this effort, along with others, has received reduced funding.

With regard to students from the first-generation background, there are sparse data related to students who complete the doctoral degree. Financial resources impact the first-generation students as well, since students with higher levels of debt from their undergraduate years are less likely to pursue graduate enrollment (Perna, 2004) and first-generation doctoral students are more likely to report higher debt than their non-first-generation peers (Hoffer et al., 2003).

In view of unequal representation, disparities exist in the potential faculty pool (Gonzalez, J. C., 2007). According to Gonzalez, inequality is reflected in the disproportionate number of Latinas completing the terminal degrees, compared to their White counterparts.

### **First-Generation Characteristics**

This study focused on first-generation learners. This group of people has unique characteristics that are discussed in this section. First-generation students tend to have lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Young, 2007). Commonly defined as those whose parents did not receive an undergraduate degree (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), first-generation students have been found to have several traits that characterize them as an at-risk population in higher education (Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Students from this population are more likely to grow up in low-income families, receive less support from their family related to college enrollment, hold a full-time job during college, and spend less time interacting with faculty (Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students also take longer to complete their bachelor's degree and have lower degree aspirations compared to their peers (Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

A report issued by the U.S. Department of Education (Chen, 2005) indicated that first-generation students were less prepared academically for college, as demonstrated by their lower college entrance exam scores, lower senior achievement test scores, and lower rates of taking higher level mathematics courses while in high school. These students were also more likely to delay postsecondary entry and to enroll at 2-year community colleges, as well as to attend part time and discontinuously. Chen (2005) noted that these characteristics put the students at potential risk for not persisting in postsecondary studies and achieving a degree.

Several studies indicate that first-generation students differ from their peers. These students are disproportionately non-White, low-income, and female (Choy, as

cited in Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Bui (2002) added a descriptor: These students are more likely to speak a language other than English at home. In a study examining differences between continuing-generation college students and first-generation college students, Komad (2002) found that first-generation students tended to be self-motivated and intrinsically driven to achieve, despite perceived negative early educational experiences.

Hicks and Dennis (2005) stated that first-generation college students were not generally considered ideal students in terms of being well prepared, having earned good grades in high school, or having the self-esteem and self-efficacy necessary to graduate. However, their study found that first-generation students were more motivated in achieving a specific goal and “wanted to accomplish something in life” (p. 47). The researchers noted that, although at a disadvantage, the students realized what they needed to persist in college and to achieve their goals.

Numerous empirical studies have targeted first-generation college students. Topics of studies have include personality characteristics, cognitive development, academic preparation, and first-year performance (Bui, 2002). Nevertheless, little research explains the *meaning* of their perspectives and how they are related to each other within a lived experience. The majority of existing studies focus on retention issues (Ishitani, 2003) rather than on motivation for seeking higher education.

Since most students who identify as first generation are also from low-income and minority backgrounds, other barriers come into the picture, such as rising costs of pursuing higher education (Schmidt, 2004). Schmidt stated that a report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education found a college education to be less affordable in 2002 than it was in 1992. The report concluded that financial aid spending was not keeping up with the cost of tuition. Consequently, first-generation Hispanic

students are less likely to attend a university. In addition to the challenge of continuing to make a college education accessible to low-income students, higher education faces the challenge of the growing demands of an ethnically diverse population (Brown & Gamber, 2002). Cornelius-White, Garza, and Hoey (2004) stated that personality traits relate to academic success but noted that very little specific information exists regarding the personality traits of academically successful first-generation Hispanic students, particularly those identified as Mexican American.

Specifically, scholars have found that these students rely heavily on self-motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalized locus of control to persist (Naumann et al., 2003); however, such studies documenting successful achievements by these students, particularly beyond access to college, are few in number. Taken together, disproportionately little is known about the experiences of those first-generation students who persist to graduate school and their experiences once enrolled.

Bui (2002) suggested that professional and peer counselors can help first-generation students to handle the social and emotional issues related to attending college, as well as provide assistance with issues typically of concern, such as financial aid. Postsecondary institutions, according to de los Santos, Asgary, Nazemzadeh, and DeShields (2005), can improve the climate for Hispanic students by mentoring and providing a supportive environment through student organizations and university activities that show acceptance and sensitivity to the Hispanic culture. Furthermore, secondary schools can accelerate the higher education of Hispanic students by implementing better counseling and mentoring. According to de los Santos et al., these services should be offered in addition to academic enrichment, parental involvement, personal enrichment, social integration, and scholarships. Ishitani (2003) stated that, because lower levels of academic and social integration are found among first-generation

students, getting those students with risk factors involved with advisors sooner and with greater frequency may help them to socialize more easily into the environment of higher education. Collatos, Morrell, Nuno, and Lara (2004) suggested that low-income and first-generation college students particularly need advocates and mentors in their schools to assist them with college access. They noted that, too frequently, intervention programs stop after high school graduation; many marginally track students' progress or fail to assist their alumni. To add to this line of thinking is the possibility of mentoring throughout the first 2 years of college for first-generation Hispanic students.

Administrators working in the field of education must understand the factors that contribute to motivation for higher education. Of vital importance is that administrators understand the unique attributes of first-generation students. Cognitive views of motivation emphasize the importance of goals and career development. Although goals may not be well formulated and may not be fixed, "Individuals are conscious of something that they are trying to attain or to avoid" (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2007, p. 5). Expectations, attribution, and emotions shape goals and sustain motivation. Even when motivation is sustained by first-generation Hispanic students, they rarely complete a college degree, much less a doctoral degree.

### **Hispanics in the Workforce**

Hispanics currently are one of every three people in the U.S. workforce, and the U.S. Department of Labor (2010) estimates that by 2025 they will be one of every two people in the workforce. At nearly 23 million, people of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity represented 15% of the U.S. labor force in 2010. By 2018, Hispanics are expected to comprise 18% of the labor force. Hispanics are much less likely to have a college degree than are either Whites or Blacks. Approximately, one in six employed Hispanics age 25 or over has completed a bachelor's degree, which is less than half the proportion among

employed Whites. This gap in the share of employed Hispanics and Whites who are college graduates has widened over the past decade. Between 2000 and 2010 the gap between employed Whites with a college education and employed Hispanics with a college education grew from 17.6% to 19.2% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). The overall growth of Hispanics in the workforce indicates less than 3% for a period of 10 years. This is startling and further indicates the need to focus energy on the future Hispanic workforce to keep the economy growing in the next 10 years.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of a college degree and ultimately a doctoral degree is the opportunity for improved financial status. Hispanic adults with a bachelor's degree are expected to earn approximately \$1.7 million, as compared to Whites, who are expected to earn \$2.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In spite of this gap in projected earnings, Bui (2002) noted that first-generation students' motivation for a better income was facilitated by a college degree.

Students may enter the job market and find that they need to go back to school to acquire a master's, doctoral, or professional degree in order to get to the next level in their career field. The number of students attaining advanced degrees increased 2% annually from 1986 to 2004 (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004). Even though more students are attending graduate school, low-income students face difficulties in getting there.

### **Support for Hispanics in Education**

Several factors affect Hispanics' participation in education. This section identifies and discusses two existing support systems: family support and academic support programs.

### **Family Support**

In a study of successful Latina and Latino university students, Zalaquett (2006) found that family played a central role in the education of 10 of the 12 participants in his qualitative study of first-generation students. Student participants reported that strong family support had helped them to succeed in secondary school and to pursue a college education. Furthermore, this perception held true regardless of the level of information that the families possessed regarding the educational system. Zalaquett asserted that Latina and Latino parents often want to support the educational aspirations of their children but face difficulties in providing academic help. The parents may not speak English, and many do not have experience with the higher education system. First-generation students may be faced with the difficult choice between pursuing a college degree and fulfilling family expectations for employment (Terenzini et al., 1994). The decision is often to work rather than to attend college.

Ceja (2004) found that parents of the students in his study of Chicana college aspiration, despite their lack of knowledge of educational opportunities, still managed to transmit powerful educational messages that were pivotal in fostering their daughters' desire for higher education. Ceja suggested that parental messages about the importance of education, as well as the daughters' self-interpretation of their parents' lived experiences, were important in the development of the participants' college aspirations.

Direct forms of parental influence included educational messages of encouragement stressing the importance of doing well in school and attending college. Allowing that first-generation college students are more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic background (Bui, 2002), with parents unfamiliar with the world of higher education, and that parental aspirations might be communicated in ways that appear different from those of college-educated parents, Ceja (2004) observed the following:



Although their educational and occupational background did not allow parents to speak specifically and substantively about the types of colleges, their daughters should aspire to, parents' marginal conditions situated them in a unique space that allowed them to understand that education was an important way of achieving economic and social mobility. For many of these parents, attaining an education was perceived as the only viable option that would give their children the opportunity to avoid the barriers that had made it very difficult for them [parents] to achieve. (p. 357)

Ceja (2004) suggested that the participants in his study understood that their parents' lack of education, along with a lack of fluency in English and, in some cases, immigration status, were factors that had placed their parents in the margins of society. The lived experiences of the parents of the Chicana students represented an important source of strength and motivation to aspire to a college degree. Direct parental influence, as represented by the parents' messages of a "culture of possibility" (Gándara, 1995) in which faith in the possibility of mobility is communicated, combined with indirect influences, as represented by the parents' lived realities, interacted and shaped students' desire for college (Ceja, 2004).

For many ethnic minority students from Hispanic backgrounds, the family still expects their children to live at home and assist with family duties while attending college. Students may feel compelled to comply with the family's request. This may produce conflicts in the desire for higher education as students with future home and academic demands (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Abraham, Lujan, Lopez, and Walker (2002) noted that, if there are no postsecondary institutions in or near their hometown, many Hispanic students simply do not attend college, even though they are qualified to do so.

### **Academic Support Programs**

One means by which institutions of higher education address academic motivation and attend to the needs of Hispanic and first-generation students is academic support programs. K. P. Gonzalez, Stoner, and Jovel (2003) and Saunders and Serna (2004) noted the success of college preparation and university outreach programs for

high school students in influencing college-going identity. University-based academic support programs are designed with the goal of increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (Kim, 1999). In support of the commitment to provide educational opportunity for all Americans regardless of race, ethnic background, or economic circumstance, Congress established a series of programs to help low-income students to enter college, graduate, and participate more fully socially and economically in life. These programs are funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and are referred to as the TRIO programs (Council for Opportunity in Education [COE], 2007).

The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program is the academic support program from which the participants in this study were recruited and in which they took part in their undergraduate years. The program, which is a part of TRIO programs, was introduced by the U.S. Department of Education in 1989 and has grown to 200 programs nationwide. The program works with approximately 25 to 28 students who aspire to graduate degrees and ultimately a doctoral degree. The program criteria are first-generation and low income and/or underrepresented population in graduate education. The program provides seminars on graduate preparation, GRE preparation, and undergraduate research components with faculty mentors in summer internships. The program at the target university has been conducted since 1995. While financial aid programs assist students in overcoming financial barriers to college, TRIO programs help students overcome class, social and cultural barriers to higher education (COE, 2007).

Additional support identified by Mahoney (1998) suggested that some groups need additional attention in the form of counseling, advising, mentoring, or some other form of assistance to achieve academic success and that a good support program instills in students the belief that “there are only a few goals that cannot be achieved” (p. 387).

In Mahoney's examination of the emphasis on self-sufficiency within the university-based EXCEL program, he noted that, although program counselors and tutors are willing to "go all out" to assist students, their ultimate goal is to "help students learn self-sustaining skills that enable them to thrive and become independent learners" (p. 384).

Collatos et al. (2004) examined the effects of the Futures project, a college access and intervention program designed to disrupt patterns of low academic attainment and to increase college access. In this program, high school students worked with faculty to critically examine social issues affecting minority pathways to higher education. The Futures project utilized a unique curriculum centered on collaborative research and discourse. In the summers, students participated in a series of academically rigorous research seminars, where they learned to become action researchers. This type of structured program can yield benefits; Futures project students' rates of high school graduation, college acceptance, and college attendance were "significantly higher than similar minority students at their school as well as in California, and in the nation" (NCES, as cited in Collatos et al., 2004, p. 167). The students' participation in action research produced independent learning skills vital to college success.

Research findings indicate that a student's participation in an undergraduate research experience helps cognitive development and ultimate preparation and socialization for future graduate studies. Typically, students who are involved in undergraduate research develop meaningful relationships with faculty members who serve as mentors (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). The relationships help students to develop critical thinking skills and verbal and written communication skills, and provides a hands-on means to bring the field of study to life. In addition, students who participate in undergraduate research are more likely to pursue graduate studies

(Hathaway et al., 2002). A well-designed research experience offers students the opportunity to establish a comfortable working relationship with a faculty mentor. Fortier (2005) noted, “This may be the most important outcome of the research experience because first-generation and low-income college students often feel out of place or inappropriate in faculty-student interactions” (p. 8). Graduate school preparation programs are one key way to help prepare low-income students for the demands of graduate school.

Baxter Magolda (2003) found that “partnerships with educators in learning, advising and co-curricular settings that prompt creation of the internal compass are central to making the most of existing challenges during college life” (p. 246). Students engaged in undergraduate research, with a strong support network, have the opportunity to “make meaning” out of the challenges that arise during and after their research program. This helps to create what Baxter Magolda (2003) referred to as an “internal compass” that aids students to stay focused and committed to their academic, personal, and professional goals.

### **Theoretical Framework Guiding the Study**

The role of theory in educational practice is to make sense of phenomena through providing lenses for seeing. Theories offer frameworks that order information, and theories ask questions and seek clarification to understand the behaviors and situations under examination. Phenomenology as a research method in education tries to “ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 29). While there is not a set of fixed procedures, Van Manen explained hermeneutic phenomenological research in the human sciences as interplay of six research activities:

- (1) turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize

- it; (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) manipulating a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

These hermeneutic phenomenological strategies help to form the framework as a study develops with the hermeneutic approach. This was necessary to allow the lived experience to emerge as the construct of the theoretical framework for this study.

The nature of a first-generation Hispanic student who receives a doctoral degree despite odds may contribute to the student's ability to manage, cope, and achieve goals. Because of the successful outcome of the journey, it is important to understand and find meaning in the journey and not subscribe to a set theoretical framework. Ultimately, this will allow the researcher to engage in the lived experience and understand the phonological nature of each participant in the study.

Often, students who are not from the majority backgrounds (i.e., first-generation students) are silenced on the educational path. This silencing of people on the margins helps to explain the lack of research focused on the academic journeys of first-generation Hispanic students in college and in graduate school.

As the Hispanic population continues to increase in size and growth rate, the United States and Texas become increasingly dependent on the success of Hispanics in higher education based on degree attainment demanding that decision- and policy-makers identify strategies for addressing the educational attainment needs of the Hispanic population (McCabe, 2000, 2003). The Texas Workforce Investment Council (2009) identified and discussed several trends that affect the availability of qualified workers, including the increased demand for middle-skilled jobs, the need for more adult literacy and English language training, and shifting demographics (e.g., maturing population, Hispanic population growth). These and other critical issues must be addressed to ensure that Texas prospers and builds on the economic growth of the last

decade. Doctoral education serves as an important facet in continuing development of faculty and scholars within the United States and higher education. The training of future scholars to engage with future generations of students is vital to the sustaining the nation's place in the global economy. Access to doctoral education for this population and the successful completion of degree programs ensure a more robust, diverse academy. The first step is to understand the experiences of first-generation Hispanic doctoral students through an HRD lens, as proposed in this study.

Swanson and Holton (2001) defined HRD as “a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through organization development and personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance” (p. 4). Training and development of a rapidly growing population is essential in maintaining the economic prosperity of Texas and the United States.

The American higher education system is a part of HRD, and this study investigates an aspect of that system that has major implications for the development and deployment of Hispanics in organizations and, one may infer, major implications for all first-generation Hispanic students and the future of the workforce in Texas and the United States.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided the theoretical context and research approach to the study of first-generation Hispanics. It started with a review of relevant bodies of literature informing the topic of the study, followed by a discussion about the hermeneutic approach, which acts as the overarching framework by which this journey begins. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach is useful to raise awareness of the researcher's role in the research process. My experience as a first-generation Hispanic female seeking

a doctoral degree facilitated a deeper understanding of these participants' journey toward their doctoral degrees.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

To address the research questions, I adopted a qualitative research approach. Merriam (1998) identified the key basic assumption of all qualitative research as the view that “realities are constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6). This chapter begins with a restatement of the purpose and research question. The chapter then provides a rationale for naturalistic inquiry, followed by a discussion about the selected design: hermeneutic phenomenology. The chapter describes methods used for sampling, data collection, and analysis and concludes with a presentation of strategies for ensuring rigor of the findings.

#### **Restatement of the Purpose and the Research Question**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of six first-generation Hispanic students who had earned a doctoral degree. Studying this topic was significant for two reasons. First, most of the current studies focus on college students’ first-year experience and/or the experiences of at-risk students. While there are studies on academic support programs to assist disadvantaged students who are entering and graduating from colleges, no parallel research exists on success in entering and completing graduate school (Grimmitt, Bliss, & Davis, 1998). As a result, little literature is available to understand motivated first-generation Hispanic students in higher education, especially those who have earned a doctoral degree: the participants in this study. Second, first-generation Hispanic students in higher education take longer to complete a bachelor’s degree and have lower degree aspirations compared to those of other ethnic groups (Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Therefore, this study fills knowledge gaps regarding first-generation Hispanic



students who have earned a doctoral degree and takes a unique look at the lived experiences of six students on their doctoral journey at a university in Texas. The study was guided by the research question: *What are the experiences of first-generation Hispanic students on their doctoral journey?*

### **Rationale for Naturalistic Inquiry**

Embracing the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry, I adopted a naturalistic study design. A naturalistic study aims to understand a phenomenon or experience and can employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The naturalistic paradigm expands knowledge, whether or not that knowledge conflicts with previously gained knowledge (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The paradigm assumes that there are many truths that cannot be understood with rational processes or more data. Describing a naturalistic study, Erlandson et al. (1993) stated, “The purpose of a research inquiry is to seek to resolve the problem by accumulating pertinent knowledge and information and, in collaboration with the various stakeholders in the social context being studied, construct meaning directed toward that end” (p. 49). Naturalistic inquiry enables an understanding of the real world without the constraints of a rigid research design (Patton, 2002).

Due to the nature of a naturalistic study, there is a desire to have a rich description of the experience under study, which often requires qualitative approaches to “facilitate study of issues in depth and detail” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). The term *qualitative* describes a naturalistic study that focuses on “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). A qualitative study is continually evolving until the conclusion of the study. The emersion occurs as data are collected and analyzed. Each step of the process leads to new information that influenced the emerging research

design and required the researcher to make changes and adaptations (Erlandson et al., 1993).

### **Social Constructivism**

My choice of the qualitative research design was influenced by my philosophical orientation toward social constructivism. As one of the four major paradigms (positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism) in social sciences research, constructivism assumes a relativist ontology (multiple realities), a subjective epistemology (knower and subject create understanding), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Social constructivism is a worldview that holds that the social, political, and psychological realities of individuals are socially constructed by the individuals who participate in it (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). In other words, individuals gradually build their understanding of the world through their experiences and maturation; the world is subject to different interpretations by individuals. In this sense, there is no absolute truth and different individuals may interpret the central phenomenon under investigation differently. Given that, social constructivists seek to answer the question of how people have constructed their individual reality (Patton, 2002).

The choice of a qualitative research design for this study was consistent with the interpretivist framework. Under social constructivist epistemology paradigm, individuals co-construct social realities during their social interactions with one another. Meanwhile, individuals interpret social realities based on their own assumptions, perceptions, and experiences. Thus, social realities become multiple when each person provides his/her own interpretations. The experiences of Hispanic first-generation doctoral students are best described and interpreted by the students themselves. At the same time, I, as the researcher and a Hispanic woman also pursuing a doctorate, make interpretations and

representations of the collected data based on my own beliefs, values, experiences, and understanding. Thus, interpretation becomes multifaceted. Qualitative research methods helped to ensure an *emic* perspective of participants while allowing the opportunity to present who I am and where I am coming from as a researcher.

Creswell (2007) described the social constructivist research process as “researchers make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation, and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 21). A naturalistic inquiry approach to research was most appropriate for this study because it allowed me to “understand the meaning people have constructed” (p. 13).

### **Phenomenological Design**

To address the research question, I adopted a phenomenological design: the hermeneutic phenomenological design. This research methodology focuses on a study of essences. In other words, phenomenology studies “the essence of phenomenon is universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Researchers using phenomenology seek to uncover meanings in everyday existence. The ultimate aim is “the fulfillment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are” (Van Manen, 1990, p.12).

Within the naturalistic inquiry research framework, the study utilized a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is the study of the lived experiences of several individuals related to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This approach focuses on the “appearance of things” and describes the appearance from a whole perspective. From the phenomenological perspective, meaning is sought from appearance, intuition, and experience. Findings are shared as rich, accurate descriptions

of experiences that create stories, not just explanations or analyses. A phenomenological researcher is invested and interested in the experience being studied. Subjects and objects cannot be disconnected; they are interwoven within the process. Primary data come from individual experiences, and therefore interviews and observation are used to collect data. The research question is integral to the phenomenological study and is crafted carefully because it guides every step of the study. In sum, phenomenology is a research methodology aimed at “producing rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively” (Smith, 1997, p. 80). This study focused on the experiences of six first-generation Hispanic students who had earned a doctoral degree; such a central phenomenon warranted a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenological data analysis aims to “transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 36). Texts may be viewed as both the data and the product of phenomenological research (Smith, 1997).

The aim of researchers using phenomenology is to construct an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences in the *life world*. Phenomenological descriptions are rich and evocative, invoking in readers the *phenomenological nod* in recognition of a phenomenon so richly described that they too may have experienced. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 27)

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Within the phenomenology framework, I adopted the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The use of hermeneutic phenomenology enables an exploration of participants’ experiences with further abstraction and interpretation by the researcher based on the researcher’s theoretical and personal knowledge. Hermeneutic phenomenology is an “attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal

meaning structures, of lived experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Hermeneutic phenomenology has a strong focus on the researcher’s interpretation of the lived experience (Creswell, 2007).

Hermeneutics adds an interpretive element to explicate meanings and assumptions in the participants’ texts that participants themselves may have difficulty in articulating, for example, tacit practice knowledge (Crotty, 1998). Communication and language are intertwined and hermeneutics offers a way of understanding human experiences captured through language and in context (Van Manen, 1997).

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology study brought the voices of the participants into the literature by investigating their own lived experiences of pursuing the doctorate and experiences that were seminal on the path to attaining the doctorate. The inquiry derived meanings from the collected data (interviews) with the participants. These meanings and emerging themes could assist students to navigate their own educational success and doctoral journey.

### **Hermeneutic Circle**

The hermeneutic circle and dialogue of questions and answers are two key strategies drawn from the hermeneutic literature that were incorporated in this study. The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor for understanding and interpretation that is viewed as a movement between parts (data) and whole (evolving understanding of the phenomenon), each giving meaning to the other such that understanding is circular and iterative (see Figure 2). Therefore, the researcher remains open to questions that emerge from studying the phenomenon and allows the text to speak; the answer is then to be found in the text. In this context, the text was created by the researcher from data collected from participants. Understanding emerged in the process of dialogue between the researcher

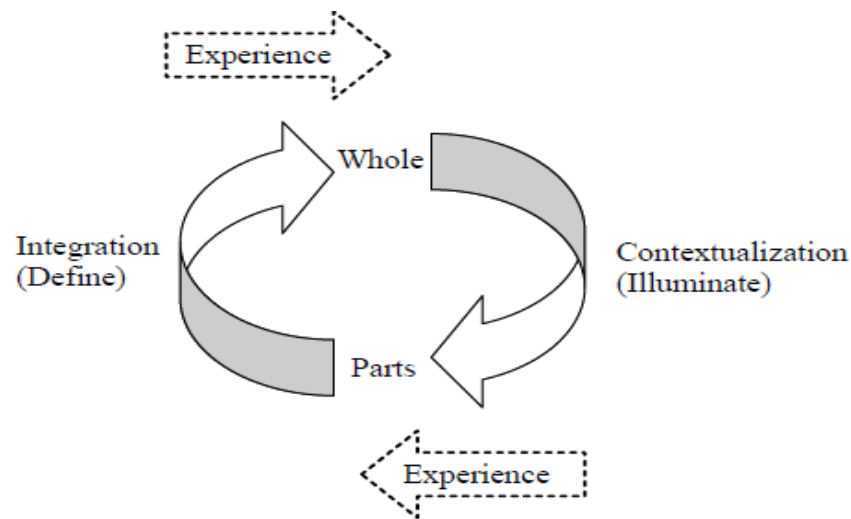


Figure 2. The basic form of the hermeneutic circle. Source: *Dimensions of the Hermeneutic Circle* (p. 4), by R. Bontekoe, 1996, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International.

and the text of the research. The act of interpretation itself represents a gradual convergence of insight on the part of the researcher and the text (Bontekoe, 1996).

The product of phenomenological research should be simple and straightforward so that readers who have experienced the phenomenon may analyze their own reality with the identified themes (Swanson-Kauffman & Schonwald, 1988). Phenomenological themes may be understood as *structures of experience* and offer a thick description of phenomena (Van Manen, 1997).

### **Hermeneutic Research Process**

In this research, a systematic method of thematic data analysis was adopted, as informed by Titchen and colleagues' work (Edwards & Titchen, 2003; Titchen, 2000; Titchen & McIntyre, 1993). This method allowed for systematic identification of participants' interpretations and constructs (first-order constructs), which were then layered with the researcher's understandings, interpretations, and constructs (second-order constructs).

**Stage 1: Immersion–Organizing the texts.** The researcher listens repeatedly to the audio recording of the interviews, along with the relevant field notes. This process is often referred to as *immersion* (in the data; Van Manen, 1997) and involves engaging with the meaning of the texts, with the aim to get a “sense” or make preliminary interpretations of the texts, which then facilitates coding. Field notes derived from observations and interactions with the participants are used to facilitate recreation of the context in which reasoning and its communication occurred, which is an important part of text interpretation. In the current study, the dissertation chair read segments of the transcripts and field notes to become familiar with the texts and to enable dialogue between him and me as the researcher to find emergent coding frameworks. This stage assisted in reflecting on emerging ideas and developing and expanding these ideas. Such dialogues are valuable for providing insight, considering alternative interpretations, contradictions, and thoroughness in interrogating data (Barbour, 2001). Emerging thoughts were documented in the form of emails after each interview and sent to the dissertation chair for comment.

**Stage 2: Understanding–Identifying first-order constructs.** The term *first-order constructs* refers to participants’ ideas expressed in their own words or phrases, which capture the precise detail of what the person is saying (Titchen & McIntyre, 1993). In the current study, these constructs were related to the interview questions.

**Stage 3: Abstraction–Identifying second-order constructs and grouping to create themes and subthemes.** In the current study, second-order constructs were generated using my theoretical and personal knowledge. Then I created a computer file for each second-order construct and all relevant extracts from interview transcripts, as well as comments received in follow-ups with each participant for clarifications and/or

probing questions. After that, I put the comments into a grid that directly related with follow-up questions and/or comments.

**Stage 4: Synthesis and theme development.** Themes were developed from the results of stages 1 through 3 of the analysis. The second-order construct files were grouped into a smaller number of broad themes both across and within the three subgroups. In this stage, I moved back and forth between the literature, the research text, and the process informed by the hermeneutic circle. Through this process, the interpretation of the research phenomenon of the lived experiences of the successful doctoral participants evolved and syntheses of participants' extracted statements were utilized to support the broad themes that emerged. "In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 107).

**Stage 5: Illuminating and illustrating the phenomena.** In this stage I examined the literature for links to the themes and subthemes identified from the entire data set. Four major themes emerged through this study: (a) support systems, (b) personal attributes, (c) identity development, and (d) socialization struggles.

**Stage 6: Integration–Testing and refining the themes.** The final stage of data analysis involved critiquing the themes, along with a final review of the literature, as well as review of the themes with a further critique to introduce to an audience for clarity and meaningfulness of the findings. Literature was incorporated into the theme and reflected in the summary.

Over a 5-month period, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews. My examination of the data in the transcripts, as well as my deep reflections on each interview, led to emergence of major themes from the interviews. Similar units of data



were placed in groups to form themes and subthemes for categorization purposes. The transcription of interviews was ongoing from October 2011 until January 2012. When transcribing of audio recordings and follow-up conversations were complete, I elaborated the themes and subthemes with verbatim segments from the transcripts.

### **Sampling Procedures**

Sampling for this study occurred at two levels: research site and participant selection. The samples were selected from the Ronald E. McNair Scholars program offered at a rural south Texas university. Purposive sampling was used to “increase the scope or range of data exposed as well as the likelihood that the full array of multiple realities will be uncovered” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40).

Purposive sampling requires a procedure that is governed by emerging insights about what is relevant to the study based on the focus determined by the problem and purposively seeks both the typical and divergent data to maximize the range of information obtained about the context. (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 148)

The goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to develop a rich or dense description of the phenomenon being investigated in a particular context (Van Manen, 1997). A purposeful sampling method was appropriate recruited from 25 doctoral recipients in a program and useful in assisting the selection of information-rich cases for detailed study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002); the cases were participants who could illuminate the phenomenon of their doctoral journey.

#### **Level 1: The Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program**

On January 8, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson launched a war on poverty. In a time that proceeded World War II and the Montgomery Government Issue Bill (G.I. Bill) and preceded the Civil Rights Movement in America, President Johnson created the federal TRIO programs. It was a far-reaching endeavor aimed at ensuring educational opportunities for all Americans. Currently, there are eight federally funded programs to assist first-generation, low-income students throughout the United States. The family of

deceased astronaut Dr. Ronald E. McNair created the McNair scholars Program, which is now a federally funded TRIO program. When Dr. McNair died in the space shuttle Challenger explosion in 1986, his family created the program to promote diversity at the doctoral level.

The McNair Scholars Program is funded at 200 colleges and universities throughout the United States. Although each program prepares its own grants and has the ability to develop curriculum with general autonomy, federal law outlines the services that must be provided. Example of services include “research or other scholarly activities, summer internships, seminars and other educational activities, tutoring, mentoring involving faculty mentors, and exposure to cultural events and academic programs” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). According to the Higher Education Act, the program is designed to provide disadvantaged college students with effective preparation for doctoral study. Competition is high for a scholars program and in Texas 20 programs are currently funded (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program at the selected research site/university in Texas had, at the time of this study, 25 program participants per year who had expressed a desire to enter graduate school and obtain a terminal degree. In order for the students to be admitted into this federal TRIO program, in addition to planning to enter a doctoral program, they must have met the following eligibility criteria: a first-generation college student of junior or senior status, meet federal low-income guidelines and from an underrepresented group in graduate education (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Students who meet criteria for the program were enrolled in a degree-granting program at an eligible institution. The university in this study is eligible and located in south Texas and has been funded since 1995. Consistent with all McNair projects across the nation, at least two thirds of the participants must be low-income, first-generation

college students; the remaining participants must be from groups that are underrepresented in graduate education (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

## **Level 2: Participant Selection**

The six participants were recruited from students who participated in a Ronald E. McNair scholars program as undergraduate students and had earned a doctoral degree in the program administered at the selected university. All participants had been part of a program while in their undergraduate education and all met the following criteria: (a) self-identified as first-generation college graduates (neither parent had a college degree), (b) self-identified as Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, and (c) already attained a doctoral degree (PhD or EdD).

The primary goal of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to study only this group, with no intent to generalize the findings to all first-generation Hispanic students. Utilizing this group reflected a convenient sampling method as I work at the selected university where the Ronald E. McNair program is administered. To recruit study participants, I made the first contact by telephone, using numbers obtained from demographic historical program files at the university that contained contact information. I reintroduced myself to the participants as a researcher and asked for their valid email address (Appendix A) to send the recruitment flier (Appendix B). I then made a second contact with the potential participants via email and sent the consent form (Appendix C).

Once participants had consented to participate in the study and return the signed consent form, I asked them to engage in the following activities in the research process: (a) participate in two rounds of face-to-face interviews (in English) with me, (b) review interview transcriptions and my interpretations for verification of accuracy (member checking), and (c) provide and describe a picture that represented their journey or

symbolized their experience. (The photographs are shown on the day of the presentation of the study and incorporated into the stories/narratives). The sample consisted of six first-generation Hispanic students. The detailed information on each of them is presented in Chapter IV.

I conducted two rounds of interviews with each participant. The first round interviews lasted 63 to 81 minutes each, followed by second, shorter interviews lasting 24 to 47 minutes. To make the best use of the time available for the interview and to obtain “more systematic and comprehensive” information from participants (Patton, 2002, p. 343), I developed an interview guide (Appendix D).

### **Data Collection**

Naturalistic inquiry is unique in that the researcher plays a vital role in information or data collection; in other words, the researcher serves as the primary research instrument (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) and the researcher’s senses guide data collection and construction of reality (Erlandson et al., 1993). The data are collected not only via in-depth interviews with the participants but also via the lived experiences of the researcher with the participants through interviews and observations.

The naturalist elects to use him- or herself as well as other humans as the primary data-gathering instruments . . . because it would be virtually impossible to devise a *priori* a nonhuman instrument with sufficient adaptability to encompass and adjust to the variety of realities that will be encountered; because of the understanding that all instruments interact with respondents and objects, but that only the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction; because the intrusion of instruments intervenes in the mutual shaping of other elements and that shaping can be appreciated and evaluated only by a human; and because all instruments are value-based and interact with local values but only the human is in a position to identify and take into account (to some extent) those resulting biases. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39)

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the interview is the primary method for data collection and serves very specific purposes. First, interviews are used as a means to

exploring and gathering narratives (or stories) of lived experiences. Second, interviewing is a vehicle by which to develop a conversational relationship between the researcher and participant about the meaning of an experience. This can be achieved through reflection with the participant on the topic at hand (Van Manen, 1997). Interviews allow participants to share their stories in their own words. There are various ways of conducting research interviews, including semistructured interviews (Minichiello, Madison, Hays, Courtney, & St. John, 1999). I adopted a semistructured interview format to provide the advantages of both structured and unstructured interviews. Semistructured interviews provide greater breadth or richness in data, compared to structured interviews, and allow participants freedom to respond to questions and probes and to narrate their experiences without being limited to specific answers (Morse & Field, 1995). The purpose of the interviews is to capture the lived experience of the participants as “interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action” (Seidman, 2005, p. 10). The phenomenological interview protocol is comprised of a series of three interviews. The participant’s experience and context are explored in the first interview. The second interview delves more in depth into the experience within the context and allows the participant to reconstruct the detailed experience. The third interview explores the meaning of the experience for the individual (Seidman, 2005). In this study the interviews took place within a span of 5 months. The period varied for participants and was based on the progress of data collection and the location of the participant.

### **Observations**

In addition to conducting phenomenological interviews, I conducted observations. Observation provided an opportunity to construct a context in which the participants function, which added to the richness of the data collection. In this study

there was limited opportunity for observation; however, observations made during the interview process provided useful insights. In addition, travel to interview participants at the site of their selection afforded opportunities to observe office space, home space, and work environment of the participants. These observations were recorded in field notes.

### **Documents**

The third source of the data for this study was pictures provided by the participants. These pictures served as supplementary information that led to richer and thicker description of participants and deeper understanding of their doctoral journeys. According to researchers who have used creative qualitative research methods, the development and utilization of a photograph as part of a new mobilities paradigm (Fincham & Rogge, 2010) is fitting with qualitative research in which the researcher seeks to build a deep understanding of a phenomenon.

### **Data Analysis**

Aligned with the methodology adopted for this study, I developed data analysis procedures based on phenomenological and hermeneutic principles and guidelines in the literature. Table 1 depicts the six stages followed for data analysis. Throughout all stages of the data analysis, there was ongoing interpretation of the research text and the phenomenon of the lived experience of the doctoral journey. Clarification was exploratory, avoiding leading questions or interjection of my personal experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seidman, 2005).

My assumptions about the study phenomenon were repeatedly tested by comparing and contrasting them with the findings in the research text. This method was useful in bracketing any prejudices that might have arisen in the review of literature and the recording of the personal experiences. Constant cross-checking of interpretations with the original transcripts maintained closeness (or faithfulness) to the participants'

Table 1

*Stages of Data Analysis Developed for This Study*

Stage	Tasks to Complete
1. Immersion	Organizing the dataset into texts Iterative reading of texts Preliminary interpretation of texts to facilitate coding
2. Understanding	Identifying first-order (participant) constructs Coding of data using note cards, highlighting techniques Data clustered into meaningful groups via cutting/pasting
3. Abstraction	Identifying-second order (researcher) constructs Grouping second-order constructs into subthemes
4. Synthesis, theme development	Grouping subthemes into themes Further elaboration of themes Comparing themes across subdiscipline groups
5. Illumination, illustration of phenomena	Linking literature to identified themes Reconstructing interpretations into stories
6. Integration and critique	Critique of themes by researchers Reporting final interpretation of the research

constructs, grounding interpretations in the data. This strategy to maintain authenticity was suggested by Lincoln and Guba (2000).

In addition to the above six stages for data analysis, I used the qualitative software package *Nvivo 9.0*. to test the accuracy of the emerging themes identified through constant comparative analytical method and multiple coding procedures. This powerful query tool uncovered subtle trends in the data collection. The automated features of the software analysis tested key themes and subthemes to reiterate the outcomes of the emergent themes. For example, the words *family and support* were ideal to capture the frequency and linkage of these words to describe the participants' doctoral journeys. This final phase with all interviews was utilized to confirm the rigor of data

collection and analysis. Further validation of data verified the themes that emerging themes.

Throughout the data analysis process, I constantly engaged in reflections on identified themes and noted reactions to the transcripts. It was emotional during the interviews with the participants and to transcribe the conversations because of the strong relatedness that I felt with each of the participants.

As I developed the stories, the question kept arising as to whether the resulting narratives should be “stories” or “narratives.” In reading dissertations and reviewing the literature on this subject, I saw a very interesting take on this dilemma and the challenge to weave the narrative from the interviews into a story that provides both meaning and understanding. I grasped the meaning of the participants by exploring their experiences and the fluid connections that they forged among past, present, and future (Polkinghorne, 2007).

### **Report of Findings**

The narrative is the factual representations of their life events. My goal as the researcher was to attain depth and understanding about how participants comprehended their experiences, not merely to verify facts of the reported experience in their interviews and narratives. The unique narratives illuminated each individual’s journey. This perspective was vital to the study. It is why each participant in an interview contributed data so I could weave the story into the final product. Hence, I will go back and forth between the two words to adequately depict the narratives without forgetting that the interpretative aspect of each narrative is in reality a story.

Huebner (1999/1987) suggested that the pedagogical project is a journey: “Human life is a journey with a narrative structure that is best expressed in story form. We tell our own story, and come to know that of others” (p. 382). Narrative is



fundamental to being ; those who are mindful in living may, through a story, discover more about human beings. Such narrative discoveries do not lead to some objective TRUTH about the human experience; rather, they open a multitude of human *truths* that are far richer and more informative in both their complexity and simplicity.

### **Trustworthiness**

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies are not evaluated by validity and reliability; instead, they are judged based on their trustworthiness. *Trustworthiness* refers to the ability of a study to produce meaningful results (Creswell, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described four components to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative study: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Erlandson et al. (1993) stated, “[Valid research] must demonstrate its truth value, provide the basis for applying it, and allow for external judgments to be made about the consistency of its procedures and the neutrality of its findings or decisions” (p. 29). The subsequent paragraphs present a brief description of each component.

### **Credibility**

*Credibility* refers to how adequately the researcher represents the reality of the informants. When collecting data in a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument, and personal bias creates a lens through which all data are collected and reported. Measures to improve credibility assist the researcher in reporting findings that accurately reflect the experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2009). In this study I employed six strategies to ensure the credibility of research and findings: (a) prolonged engagement, (b) triangulation, (c) reiterated data analysis process, (d) peer debriefing, (e) member checking, and (f) reflexive journal.

**Prolonged engagement.** Erlandson et al. (1993) stated that prolonged engagement allows the researcher to be fully immersed in the context being studied.

“The researcher must spend enough time in the context being studied to overcome the distortions that are due to his or her impact on the context, his or her own biases, and the effect of unusual or seasonal events” (p. 30). Prolonged engagement assists in ensuring that the researcher fully understands the context but also explores personal biases and implications of the research. The interviews took place on the participant’s campus or at a research site, home, or location of the participant’s choice.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources to inform the results of the study (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) stated that it is important not to use triangulation to ensure the same results but to explore any inconsistencies in the data because “understanding inconsistencies in findings across different kinds of data can be illuminative and important” (p. 556).

Data triangulation involved comparing the consistency of information obtained at various times during a study and by various sources within the same method (Patton, 2002). I used the literature/theories, interviews, and photographs as three sources, all being compared within the method of narrative inquiry. I conducted individual interviews to collect narratives (stories). Each photograph provided a different perspective to triangulate the story when the participant described the meaning and relevance. Data triangulation provided multiple perspectives of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002).

Data from interviews in this study were triangulated by collected observational data, documents, and the researcher’s reflexive journal. All of these data sources were analyzed to explore and understand inconsistencies in the data.

**Reiterated data analysis.** According to Moustakas (1990), the validation of data obtained through a heuristic study is one of meaning. The researcher collects and analyzes the material, returning “again and again to the data to check the depictions of

the experience to determine whether the qualities of constituent that have been derived from the data embrace the necessary and sufficient meanings” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 33). I followed Moustakas’s guidance and engaged myself in the constant checking of significance and judging the data in order to “facilitate the process of achieving a valid depiction of the experience being investigated” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 33).

**Peer debriefing.** Peer debriefing is used to establish credibility in a study as it provides the researcher with a professional colleague to analyze the emerging research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described four benefits of peer debriefing. First, a peer debriefer allows the researcher to reflect on how he or she personally experiences the research process and to identify biases or limitations that may be present. Second, the peer debriefer helps the researcher to consider working hypotheses as they develop. Third, the peer debriefer assists the researcher in exploring the methodological process as it emerges throughout the study. Fourth, the “debriefing sessions provide the inquirer an opportunity for catharsis, thereby clearing the mind of emotions and feelings that may be clouding good judgment or preventing emergence of sensible next steps” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). In this study the peer debriefer (in this case, the dissertation chair) assisted with analysis of data (Appendix E). Erlandson et al. (1993) stated, “Peer debriefing helps build credibility by allowing a peer who is a professional outside the context and who has some general understanding of the study to analyze materials, test working hypotheses and emerging designs, and listen to the researcher’s ideas and concerns” (p. 140). A professional colleague who was familiar with the study provided additional peer debriefing. I met with the dissertation chair and reviewed my research memos and coding to see whether the themes and subthemes aligned with their identified themes. This process was extremely helpful in establishing the final themes.

**Member checking.** Member checks were conducted to ensure that the researcher's interpretations were accurately reflecting the participants' stories. Krefting (1991) defined *member checking* as a technique that consists of continually testing with informants the researcher's data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This strategy of revealing research materials to the informants ensures that the researcher has accurately translated the informants' viewpoints into data. Assessment to determine whether the data make sense through member checking decreases the chances of misrepresentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the interviews, each participant received a summary of the information collected, with an invitation to check the transcript for accuracy (Appendix F). This is consistent with Stage 4 of hermeneutic research process. The participants were also asked to provide feedback to ensure that their voices and experiences had been accurately represented (Erlandson et al., 1993). This entailed sharing individual interview transcripts and a draft of the narrative of findings with the respective participants and asking for feedback and clarification (Patton, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2007). During this process of validation, one participant clarified his use of the phrase "typical Hispanic family."

**Reflexive journal.** The final tool for establishing credibility is the reflexive journal, which contributes to transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Erlandson et al., 1993). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the reflexive journal as a "kind of diary in which the investigator on a daily basis or as needed, records a variety of information about self (hence the term 'reflexive') and method" (p. 327). According to these authors, the reflexive journal should contain a daily log and logistics, personal reflections and self-discoveries, and a description of the methodological process. The reflexive journal for this study (Appendix G) contained a minimum of weekly entries, including a record reactions, personal feelings and emotions, and

emerging findings (Erlandson et al., 1993). The dates and entries in the journal were instrumental in reconstructing the participants' stories. The reflexive journal aided in the transferability of this study as it assisted the researcher to record the participants' experiences. The journal explained my researcher's values, assumptions, and positionality, all of which play a critical role in the research process.

### **Transferability**

In a naturalistic study, findings may be transferred to another context, and the responsibility of the transfer of information falls both with the original researcher and the person trying to make the application (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal of transferability is for another person to be able to transfer the naturalistic inquiry to another context. It is the "obligation of the researcher to demonstrate transferability to those who would apply it to the receiving context" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 33). Three strategies to facilitate transferability were applied in this study: (a) using purposive sampling, (b) providing thick description, and (c) writing a reflexive journal (Erlandson et al., 1993).

### **Dependability**

Dependability aids the study in meeting the criterion of consistency or, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) asked, "How can one determine whether the findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects (respondents) in the same (or similar) context?" (p. 290). The dependability audit and the reflexive journal are used as tools to establish dependability in a naturalistic study (Erlandson et al., 1993). The audit trail allows the external auditor in the dependability audit to understand the steps and processes in the study. The faculty dissertation committee served as the auditor of this research process, supplementing the peer debriefing process.

### **Confirmability**

The tools for ensuring confirmability are a confirmability audit and the reflexive journal. The confirmability audit is similar to the dependability audit; “an adequate trail should be left to enable the auditor to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the inquiry” ((Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 35). Similar to dependability, confirmability is the “degree to which the findings are a function solely of the informants and conditions of the research and not of other biases, motivations, and perspectives” (Krefting, 1991, p. 216). Multiple data sources and a peer examiner strengthened confirmability of the study. The researcher was consistently clear about her personal and professional background and the lenses that were used to explore the data.

**Thick descriptions.** According to Denzin (1989), “Thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts. . . . Thin descriptions, by contrast, lack detail and simply report facts” (p. 83). The purpose of thick descriptions is to establish credibility by transporting the reader via the detailed story into a setting or event (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In addition, “thick description provides for transferability by describing in multiple low-level abstractions the data base from which transferability judgments may be made by potential appliers” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 145). Thick descriptions utilize all of the senses of the researcher to describe the context of the findings and include descriptions of the physical location and people, using quotes from the participants to support the descriptions (Erlandson et al., 1993).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Internal Review Board (IRB) of Texas A&M University. The ethical considerations on which the study was conducted are as follows (Borg & Gall, 1989; Erlandson et al., 1993;

Merriam, 1998): (a) protection of participants from any psychological harm such as loss of self-esteem, (b) protection of participants' confidentiality, and (c) informed consent obtained prior to any research activity. All names and related data were assigned pseudonyms chosen by the participants. Only the researcher was aware of the participants' actual names. All collected data were stored in a location to which only the researcher and dissertation chair had access.

### **The Researcher's Positionality**

In qualitative research the primary research instrument is the researcher (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Moustakas (1994) emphasized the importance of identifying the researcher's positionality in a phenomenological study in order to "set aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (p. 85). Therefore, it was important for me to reflect on my experiences, recognize my own assumptions and subjectivism, and to understand how these elements of me as researcher might impact the research process.

### **My Family Upbringing**

I was raised in a traditional first-generation Hispanic family in the United States. My father worked as a truck driver; my mother was a homemaker cleaning a home to make extra money. I was encouraged to attend college; however, not really knowing and actually fearing the "world of college" was a mixed message for my family. I was told to "do my best" and share all I had with others. I never had much. Although I was encouraged to pursue a career, my mother and role model was a homemaker. My expectations and motivations for college were based on having a child at the age of 19 and realizing that college was a necessity to escape poverty and provide for my son as a single mother. The role of mother and my current role as an administrator have been at conflict at times. However, I currently seek the doctoral degree as a first-generation

Hispanic woman. Consequently, my personal interests are intertwined with my academic interest in this study.

### **My Career Life**

I have worked in the field of student affairs for the past 22 years, during which time I have administered several programs for first-generation and Hispanic students at a university in south Texas. One of these programs that is effective with highly motivated students is the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, with which I have worked for the past 15 years. I am the demographic that this study seeks to understand: a first-generation Hispanic female. I work in the Division of Student Affairs at Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK), and a large part of my educational and career experience have been at the university.

### **My Worldview**

I view the world through a social constructivist perspective. I believe that people co-construct their individual experiences through interactions. Consequently, each person's reality is different. This perspective influenced how I co-generated interview data with the participants and how I made sense of the information collected in this study. My philosophical orientation influenced my methodological choices, including methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

## **Chapter Summary**

A naturalistic study can provide a depth of information about a particular phenomenon. This type of study cannot be generalized to large populations but it can be very useful in understanding the experiences of individuals or groups. Given the nature of the research question that guided this study, a naturalistic study design, particularly the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, provided understanding needed to address the gaps in the current literature related to first-generation Hispanic students



who succeeded in their pursuit of a doctoral degree despite challenges and low educational attainments that are currently typical for this group.

## CHAPTER IV

### PARTICIPANTS' STORIES/NARRATIVES

As a first-generation Hispanic doctoral student, my personal educational journey has been both challenging and fulfilling; therefore, I was interested in learning whether other first-generation Hispanic doctoral students had shared a similar experience. Further, being an administrator at a Hispanic serving institution, I have assisted a Hispanic students to pursue a college education, stay in college, and consider graduate studies. By conducting this dissertation study, I have gained a broader perspective and deeper insight into the unique “lived experiences” of six first-generation Hispanic participants.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of six first-generation Hispanic persons who had earned a doctoral degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.). This study was guided by one main research question: *What are the experiences of first generation selected Hispanic students with their doctoral journey?*

To address the research question, I conducted individual, face-to-face interviews with the six participants. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants, which often required me to travel long distances by car and by plane. In addition to the primary interviews, I conducted a second-round follow-up interview with each participant to clarify issues or probe for additional information. The first round of interviews generated a total of 137 pages of data, complemented by 24 pages of data obtained from the follow-up interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist and me. In addition to conducting interviews, I requested each participant to submit a picture that best represented their experience on the doctoral journal; these pictures provide additional rich graphic data to complement the stories

generated in the interviews. Furthermore, I kept a research journal documenting my observations of the participant and the surroundings where each interview occurred. For the purpose of confidentiality, I referred to each participant with a pseudonym of the participant's choice.

The interviews provide the context to create a unique story for each participant. The stories provided the context from which themes emerged through data analysis. I extracted quotes from the interview transcripts and identified major themes and subthemes for the data analysis process. Direct quotes from the interviews are included to understand and relate to each participant. Each direct quote is identified by a code (e.g., Anton, 110), indicating the index card where the direct quote was located (Appendix H). I conducted content analysis method as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This technique involves “taking constructions gathered from the context and reconstructing them into meaningful wholes” (p. 333).

The major findings were constructed from three data sources: interviews, observations, and pictures with the participants' interpretations. The chapter begins with a brief description of the participants, followed by an in-depth report of the interview findings in the story format. To enrich understanding of participants' experiences, I include pictures from participants that are meant to illustrate their personal journey, along with their interpretation of these graphic presentations. The chapter ends with a summary and my observations of the participants and surroundings in which each interview occurred.

### **Profile of Participants**

The participants in this study were six first-generation Hispanic persons who had completed a doctoral program in the United States. Their journey is marked by overcoming struggles and barriers to remain on their path to success. All the participants

came from a Hispanic first-generation family. All are currently married and have children. All had a mother, father, and siblings. Several of the participants' parents were divorced during the participant's teen years, which was a major turning point for the participants. Two participants came from a migrant background, and their lives included traveling to other states for several months each year. Four participants hold either a part-time or full-time teaching position at a university. Two are working as postdoctoral residents in a laboratory setting. Table 2 is a snapshot of the participants.

Table 2

*Profiles of Participants*

Name	Age	Position	Status	Major/degree
Anton	33	Assistant Professor	Married	Chemistry, Ph.D.
Flaca Migrante	35	Researcher	Married	Molecular Pathology, Ph.D.
Dr. Teacher	31	Assistant Principal	Married	Education Leadership, Ed.D.
Laura	34	Assistant Professor	Married	Biology, Ph.D.
Elena	35	Assistant Professor	Married	Toxicology, Ph.D.
Dr. Chemist	31	Senior Scientist	Married	Chemistry, Ph.D.

**Participants' Stories (Narratives)****Anton Velez Martinez**

Anton Velez Martinez is 33 years old, born in an urban area of south Texas. He defined himself as a first-generation college graduate and a proud Mexican American. At the time of interview Anton was working as a postdoctoral student in Montreal, Canada. He lives with his wife, whom he had met during his undergraduate years at a medium

size university in south Texas. Anton graduated with a Ph.D. in Development and Analytical Chemistry from a reputed research-intensive university in the northern United States. Immediately after graduation, Anton was offered a postdoctoral position in Canada, far away from south Texas. During the interview, Anton carefully thought of a pseudonym to be used for this study. His choice was a blend of three people who had been instrumental in helping him through his doctoral journey: a friend (Anton), a mentor (Velez), and his lovely wife (Martinez). This selection provided a glimpse into the importance of connectivity to others that Anton valued and his appreciation for the strong support given by these three people during his transitional phases in the doctoral journey.

Family is very important to Anton. He related that he had enjoyed playing with his cousins when he was young. It was a time that his personality came out because he described himself as being otherwise shy and very quiet. He and his cousins made videos and played “mad scientist.” During the interview, Anton laughed about his childhood and said, “How ironic, now I am a scientist” (Anton, 113).

Although he described himself as a “typical Hispanic,” there were things in his life that Anton felt did not prescribe to the tenets of a traditional Hispanic family; for example, Anton cannot speak Spanish, and his parents were divorced. However, Anton shared that he called his aunt *tia*, which means *aunt* in Spanish. Anton thought that several of his life experiences when he was growing up had given him the tenacity to persevere and attain his goals.

For the first 11 years of my life we were together as a family. I had two sisters at that time and I remember growing up. We lived in San Antonio for a while and in junior high my parents got divorced and things got awkward. (Anton, 96)

Anton worked hard to reconcile his perception of what a “typical Hispanic” family should be and his own reality that he came from a divorced family. Adolescence

and junior high school was “kind of awkward” for Anton. Even though he was shy, it did not stop his interest in girls, which definitely affected his academic focus. Just like his hormones, Anton’s grades were “all over the place.” He became bored, which had an effect on his focus in school. To add complexity, Anton’s parents’ divorce left him in turmoil and he wanted to leave the dysfunctional life with his divorced mother and father, so he moved to another part of the state to live with his aunt. “Honestly, I didn’t have anyone guiding me once I got to junior high” (Anton, 127). Anton reported that his aunt listened, providing subtle support. She often nodded and told him to “go for it” in broken English. Anton laughed about this and mimicked the way she said it.

Life began to present interesting early challenges on his educational path. Anton felt that no one in his family could offer guidance or mentoring. One example offered by Anton was that no one understood his homework, nor could he recall anyone asking him about schoolwork. Anton recalled that, during one teacher conference, his teacher shared with his father her concern about Anton’s fluctuating grades (A for one week and C for the following week). His father got upset with him, but that was before the divorce. Anton recalled, “I remember asking for help and no one helped me, so I had to rely on myself and figure things out when it came to school.” With a pensive look, Anton commented, “I don’t think it was because they didn’t want to help me; rather, it was because they didn’t know how to help” (Anton, 144). Neither of Anton’s parents had graduated from high school, nor did they understand what he needed, but he felt bad about it because they worked hard at low-paying jobs.

High school was challenging to Anton; he found that he could get by without much studying. He shared that things were also easier living with his aunt. Thus, Anton developed very few study habits and lacked discipline for the academic rigor he would later encounter in college. It was not surprising that Anton found his first year of college

a “real shock.” After his first semester, Anton had a GPA of 1.0 (out of 4.0) and he could not believe that his grades were that bad. Anton said that he remembered thinking, “Wow, this school is like down the street from where I live and it is a whole different world” (Anton, 94). Nevertheless, once again Anton persevered because he wanted to stay in school and finish; quitting or being dismissed from the university was not an option. So he found a perfect spot at the library where he could set up his books and papers and study. After awhile, others knew that they could find Anton at an old long table at the right-side corner on the second floor of the library.

Anton credited the Ronald E. McNair undergraduate program and the renowned Toxins Center for their support and encouragement in his pursuit of higher education. Anton had switched between the majors of kinesiology and sciences when he first came to the university. However, once he expressed an interest in biology, his faculty mentor told him that his “wishy-washy behavior” would not work and that he would have to focus. Even though the toxins lab was not his initial focus, Anton’s first real mentors were Drs. White and Brown (pseudonyms), who supervised the lab. He wanted to gain their trust and confidence. With deep appreciation, Anton felt that this was his first experience in a real educational support system.

Before long, Anton was on his way to his doctoral journey. He had originally planned to stay in Texas, until he met his wife. They decided that they were going to go somewhere that would work for both of them, which meant leaving Texas and both of their families. Anton and his wife aspired to be accepted in a doctoral program to fulfill both their aspirations. Anton felt blessed that his wife became his main support during this transition in his life.

Money was a driving factor and the need to search for a school that would them the best fellowship was challenging. During the period of application, Anton

experienced a high level of stress in trying to find the right balance. The program and college had to be the best fit, not only for him but also for his wife. Emotions were high for Anton, his wife, and their families. “Latino families are known for highly expressed emotions.” So this “big step” was enmeshed with opportunity, choices, emotions, and tears. “You know that Latino thing. My mom still cries because we are gone. The whole dynamic was and is so hard.” Anton would have stayed in Texas but his wife was his family now: “Our family has to understand that this is good for us. I don’t think they understand” (Anton, 123). Anton described this dynamic as “a unique struggle” for him. Once he got into the doctoral program, he had to focus again and the thought of going home to visit was hard because the emotions were too much to carry from Texas to Indiana each time they came to visit. Anton recalled the early days of college when he found his corner table in the library and once again needed to focus. His motivation for focusing was through hard work and challenging himself to prove that he could succeed.

Anton’s first mentors influenced his research interests in his undergraduate years. Reflecting on the beginning of his doctoral experience, Anton stated,

I had a master’s degree and I was a bit older than most of the younger doctoral students. I worked hard. I was confident, driven and working to please so a faculty member would take me into their lab. That explains why my pseudonym includes the faculty who took me into their lab during my doctoral program.

Mentoring was very important to Anton but he knew that he needed to prove himself at each step of the journey.

Anton said that at times he felt that his doctoral journey was like a tunnel with no end. He believed that he would not have made it without the initial support that provided him a foundation for his doctoral journey. Anton’s initial mentors helped him to navigate the rough times.

I would have been more confident to get a support group like family and close friends who were going through the same thing. But, being that we were far away from those comforts in life, I was fortunate to find a new support system. I can’t



express enough how important it was to have people with me who see what I see. (Anton, 117)

During his doctoral journey, Anton's closest faculty member was a Latino professor who shared many of the same personality characteristics. This faculty member was from a small town as Anton was and could relate to him, which later proved to be instrumental in his doctoral program. Ultimately, Anton did not join his lab but was sent to another faculty lab where he might approach the faculty there to obtain a position in the laboratory. Anton finally joined the lab of a faculty member of Chinese descent with an excellent reputation. His Chinese mentor was demanding and expected a good work ethic. Anton felt that he was being tested but recalled how he had persevered in high school, in college, and then in the laboratory.

This was a typical day. I would have my faculty ask a question about a reaction or outcome on an experiment and it would turn into grilling me. I would end up feeling so dumb and he would just yell while we were in the lab. (Anton, 115)

Anton thought that his Chinese mentor hated him and wished that he could be in the Latino professor's lab. The arguments with his mentor left Anton feeling very upset; then the mentor would pass by and ask a random question: "Hey, did you see the game?" This was confusing to Anton. He came to realize later that his mentor was pushing him to be the best. Anton was able to be prepared and defend his research. He was prepared because of his undergraduate research experience and his past mentors. Now he expressed how honored he felt to work in this Chinese professor's lab.

Currently, Anton is focused and enjoying his postdoctoral work in a beautiful area in the upper part of northern United States. He frequently mentioned that it was very cold that but predicted that he would eventually come home to Texas. He talked about his current research in cancer biology, hoping to find a cure for cancer, with a major conviction to make a difference for people in general. (Anton shared that his mother had been diagnosed with cancer.)

Now my research hits close to home because my mom just got diagnosed with cancer, so maybe I can help. I know I got her to go to some great doctors in Texas. So I am doing what I can. (Anton, 92)

Anton is now working with a notable scientist from Harvard whom he truly respect: “He is like me and I want to be like him.” Anton said that he felt lucky to be working with a scientist at this level. He did not consider opportunity to be sheer luck; it was a direct result of his hard work and the recognition of his work by astute faculty mentors along his journey, both researchers and scientists. Anton ended the interview with the following remark: “Who would have thought I would be here? I am good right now” (Anton, 118).

### **Laura**

Laura is 34, mother of four children. She received a Ph.D. degree in biology from a large flagship university in Texas and currently works with her husband, who is a medical doctor. Her love of biology and desire to help people are fostered by her work with her husband in several clinics. She teaches at a local university in upstate New York.

Laura grew up in a small town along the Rio Grande River in south Texas. She indicated that she always thought about her mother’s poignant remarks about education that they were lucky that they had come from Mexico because they had many more opportunities in the United States and life would be better.

Laura spent most of her early school years trying to keep up with her class work. Her families were migrant workers so each year they traveled north to pick crops or to work in the canneries. Laura has vivid memories of her brothers and herself loading up in the back of the truck, which had a big camper cover over it, and driving for several days to get to the northern states to work. “I hated it that I was always behind when we came back from migrating but I caught up pretty quickly.” Even though it was a hard life, she had fond memories of her entire family being together and her parents taking

good care of her. She chuckled when she recalled that her mother would save them fruit and tomatoes from the fields as snacks for later in the night.

By the time Laura was in high school, her father had a job at a local factory in Texas next to the Mexico border. He told Laura that he felt lucky that he had the job so they would not have to be migrating all of the time.

I always admired how well my father did for himself. He never went to college but he did stay in school until the eighth grade. Many of his family members never even got to do that because they had to drop out to work the fields. (Laura, 158)

Laura said that she was motivated to get good grades throughout her early years. She would plea with her mother to visit the school and get homework assignments before they migrated each year. Many times she translated and even spoke for her mother so she could get homework assignments.

One aspect of her drive was the self-imposed competition to keep raising the bar for herself by trying to get better grades than everyone else in her class. In high school, Laura pushed herself to get into all of the honors classes. Her high school counselor had told her that if she took these classes and did well, opportunities for scholarships would be available for her. “We were always up at dawn and finished when it was dark. It was hard work and, many times at night, it was cold and dark and scary” (Laura, 160).

Laura’s early life was full of work and more work in the fields. She had to catch up with school work because she did not want to live like her family and struggle all the time. She saw school as a way out of the heat and long hours of migrating. Laura’s father insisted that she speak Spanish at home but reminded her, “Remember, you have to speak English at school because people will think you are dumb if you only speak Spanish” (Laura, 159).

Laura practiced English all the time to reduce her heavy accent. She received scholarship offers from two universities. One was close to her home, the other was more

than 2 hours away. Laura thought that it would be good to attend the second university and checked the surroundings. She decided that the campus close to Mexico would present less a challenge and her family told her that she should go where she wanted to go. She eventually decided to go to the university farther from her family. The comprehensive research campus in south Texas also offered the same academic scholarship and she expected that she would get a better college experience.

Once Laura moved into her dorm on campus, she was excited because she was the first person in her family to go to college. Her father was very uncomfortable that she would be living alone but Laura kept trying to tell him that she had a roommate and many other females down the hall. He seemed to think that females in a dorm were not safe and needed protection. The irony is that, even today, Laura is still the only person in her family to obtain a college degree. She reported this with a whimsical smile.

Although she “did the right thing” many times, Laura felt like an outsider in her own family.

My mom still wants to give me *consejos* [advice] but I find that it doesn't sound the same as when I was younger. I now want to add my own take on her advice, and it offends her, so I just listen and smile. (Laura, 163)

During her undergraduate years Laura participated in the McNair Scholars program. She credited her increased confidence and support to many activities in which she took part when she was exposed to the scholarly activities and undergraduate research. Her undergraduate years involved extensive lab time, many times late into the night. Often, her friends were at local nightclubs as she was walking back to the dorm from her lab, and she would see her dorm friends coming in from partying. She always felt that she was missing something but she knew that her success was more important than any night life. She had decided that her success would gain financial support for

herself and her family. Laura's financial aid did not go far but it was more money than she had at home.

Laura got her first taste of what she could do with education when she traveled with her mentor to present her research. She observed how easily he paid for the hotel room and meals without concern about money. She was embarrassed that she and her family had never enough money to take a trip or to pay for a hotel. She had to think how much she could spend each of the 4 days of the conference because she had only \$100. She felt guilty that she had told her mother not to treat her like a baby by packing snacks for her. "Those snacks came in handy in between meals at the conference" (Laura, 164). Laura explained that she felt like she was back in the fields, waiting for her mother to tell her it was all right to eat the fruit at the end of the day after it was washed properly. She watched carefully to see what the conference provided in terms of drinks and food. It appeared that all of the other students went out to eat, without concern.

Laura's faculty mentor was supportive of her educational pursuits but sometimes told her to slow down. This simply made Laura more determined to complete her degree and move on. At 21, Laura earned a degree in biology and applied to a direct pipeline program for a doctorate at a large flagship university. She was accepted. Laura recalled her mentor's reaction:

"If you are going to conduct research, you should stay here and work with me in the lab. You could always go after a master's degree." I could not believe what he told me. I know he was trying to get me to stay because I did great work in the lab and I was always there. I knew that I was ready to go. (Laura, 166)

Laura quickly realized that she did not even have a driver's license to drive to her new campus. The advisor with the scholars program helped her to get a license by taking her to practice driving for 3 weeks so she would be comfortable driving before she took the driving test. After getting her license, Laura was ready to embark on her new journey. Her family had a "going away" party for her that made her feel as if she was

going to another country! Family members warned her about the dangers of the city and living so far away. The reality was that Laura was moving only 6 hours away.

I always thought, “Wow, what would they say if I left the state to go to school?” The reality of my journey was that I was scared and worried that I would not make it, and then what was I going to do? (Laura, 171)

Laura described her orientation to graduate school at the larger, intensive research university. The students were invited to talk about their most recent vacation or excursion.

I thought, “Oh, my god! I have never been on a vacation; my parents always had to work.” Then I remembered my trip with my faculty mentor to Puerto Rico to present my research, so I talked about how pretty it is and the food was always served with *tostones* [fried plantain]. So I talked about my trip as if it were my family vacation. I later called the program and my mentor and thanked them for having faith in me and supporting me during my years in south Texas. (Laura, 162)

Several times in Laur’s graduate journey, she turned to the support that she had received in her undergraduate years. A banquet was held for students at the university to honor the students, and Laura invited her former advisor to join her.

I had to invite family members to come to a dinner. We were told to invite family members for our table. My family could not come, they had to work. I called my program director and asked her to please come. She came, and I felt so good to see her. (Laura, 159)

Sometimes Laura thought that everyone knew what to do and had their support group and she did not. “Not sure why I felt that way, but it was an ongoing thing with me. I think that maybe I was strong but I was still feeling isolated or alone at times” (Laura, 154). Although she felt this way, she explained in specific terms her research interests and the reason she has an office with her husband and teaches a course at the local university. She stated that she loves being able to make a difference in the classroom. She proudly stated that she has four wonderful children and a wonderful husband.

I still find myself explaining to others many times when my husband and I go out. I am Hispanic and he is White, so when we are mingling and people ask me what I do, I tell them I'm a doctor and I teach. Sometimes it's funny because people say, "Yes, we know he is a doctor; what about you?" . . . I just laugh [and say], "I am a doctor, too!" (Laura, 156)

### **Dr. Teacher**

Dr. Teacher is 31 years old, married and the father of a daughter who is the apple of his eye; he was born to poor, hardworking, and supportive parents. Dr. Teacher received an Ed.D. degree in Educational Leadership from a university in south Texas and works as an Assistant Principal at a middle school in a small rural area in south Texas. He made sure to point out that at his school the majority of his students received free or reduced-price lunch and that he loved his job and "his kids."

Dr. Teacher started the interview by stating, "I spent a lot of time at the hospital due to my asthma, and it was hard for my family because we were poor" (Dr. Teacher, 9). As a sickly boy, he spent time at home alone, in bed. He conceded that this was not allowed by law but noted that "things were different back then" and that his grandmother lived next door. His grandmother would bring him homemade soup and cold lemonade.

As time passed, his hard-working parents got better jobs, the asthmatic young boy got better, and his parents' loving support never waned. "It was a struggle growing up poor" (Dr. Teacher, 9). He said that his parents always told him that things could get better with hard work.

Hard work became Dr. Teacher's mantra as he went through his educational journey. While in junior high school, he worked hard and started to excel in his classes. He participated in honors courses and his parents always supported him for the academic meets. They were happy that he was getting healthy and traveled to his science fairs, though many times they asked in Spanish that he explain exactly what he was doing. Once he had explained, they were happy, and his mother told the neighbors how smart and talented their son was in school.

When Dr. Teacher graduated from high school, he wanted to go to a major university, and his parents were supportive.

So, off I went to the university and it was not like anything I had expected. I felt like I didn't belong and was very uncomfortable in the environment. I wanted to come home and go to school at a smaller university. As soon as finals were finished, I couldn't get out of there fast enough. After entering the smaller university, I knew it was the right fit and felt support from the beginning. (Dr. Teacher, 26)

Dr. Teacher made sure to tell me that, as a high school student, he was ranked in the top 10 students, so he could attend any university he wanted. He wanted to attend a major university and was excited. He arrived at the large university but from the beginning did not feel that he belonged there. He knew he could handle the academics and did well his first semester, but he felt alone and scared. He waited until his second semester, called his mother, left the big university, and enrolled in a local university in rural south Texas. He felt at home on that campus. He got good grades and made friends. After only two semesters, he was referred to enroll in a scholars program because of his motivation and class work. He reported that the McNair program gave him foundational support during his undergraduate program and he appreciated the opportunity to conduct research.

The opportunity to interact with a faculty mentor was probably what gave me the confidence. This experience was what motivated me to obtain my doctoral degree. I did it for the love of family, faculty, and mentors. (Dr. Teacher, 18)

Dr. Teacher commented that he would not have succeeded with the “amazing and supportive” people who gave of themselves to assist him. He is very humble, and noted that his education had helped him so he could now help others—his students who need him. “My family has security now and our life revolves around our daughter and things I could not do, like piano. . . . I provide for all her needs. I mean we kept so busy” (Dr. Teacher, 8). When his mother calls and asks to speak with “Dr. Teacher,” he laughs and



still does not believe that he did it. However, he noted that 7 years to complete his degree was a long time for him.

Dr. Teacher stated that it was surreal when he received his letter of acceptance into the doctoral program. He recalled thoughts of happiness, excitement, and then fear. Once again, he felt that he “didn’t belong.” However, two faculty members served as his mentors, and their support gave him a boost of confidence to go on. He said that he would not have stayed in school without their support and encouragement.

Dr. Teacher reflected on his decision to leave the big flagship university and go to a smaller local university. He recalled that the support that he received from the program and faculty mentors led him to believe that he could do anything.

I recall once I did a paper and a professor handed it back to me and stated, “You have Ph.D. potential.” I thought to myself, “I have Ph.D. potential!” but only took the complement because I was too scared to think about the factor that I could actually get my doctorate. (Dr. Teacher, 14)

These types of events were factors and instrumental in his success. He mentioned them repeatedly throughout the interview.

Now things are better. I have a beautiful daughter and have been married 9 years. I am not the sickly kid I was growing up. I am lucky because my parents supported education and my wife is an educator, so I got a lot of support to finish my doctorate. (Dr. Teacher, 24)

The story comes full circle. Dr. Teacher works in a middle school, assisting and encouraging young students who live in poverty to stay in school, telling them to “work hard and you can do anything—look at me!”

Just yesterday I told a student, “You have a choice to change your life to what you want it to be. Make good grades and don’t worry too much about what you don’t have now. Stay in school and choices will open up to you.” (Dr. Teacher, 11)

### **Flaca Migrante**

Flaca Migrante is 35 years old, married, and the mother of a beautiful daughter. She obtained a Ph.D. in molecular pathology from an urban university. She was born in

Mexico in a place called La Carreta, which she described as a small ranch. A *carreta* is a small cart or wagon. Flaca is one of six children from Mexico and the only one in her family to go to college. Her siblings could not go to school because they had to help support the family; they were migrant workers. Flaca explained that this was the reason for her choice of “migrante” (migrant) as a pseudonym, as a reflection of her early life. Flaca is translated as “skinny.” She explained that presently she is not so skinny but is still called Flaca by family members.

The experiences early in her life gave her a hard work ethic; nothing is harder than being in the hot sun all day, picking crops and traveling in hot weather. Flaca was determined to keep up with schoolwork. Her mother and father told her that education is the most important thing. She harbored feelings of guilt because her older sisters never finished high school. When she was in school, she declined to talk about what she learned in school and her excitement at excelling in mathematics.

At the age of 12, Flaca and her family moved to the United States. It was part of her father’s plan to get his family out of Mexico to provide a better life and give them access to educational opportunities. He told Flaca that “education is the way out.” (Flaca, 64).

Although the United States was supposed to be the way out of poverty and full of opportunity, it turned out to be a struggle for her family. Flaca’s father’s good job and opportunity involved the whole family migrating every year to several states to pick crops in the fields. Flaca described her elementary years were extremely difficult. Because she could not speak English, she was demoted two grades. To add problems, her migrating kept her behind; other kids called her “Mexican,” even though they looked brown, too.

Through high school since we moved here to the United States, my parents didn’t have any education themselves, so we used to travel to several states like

Wyoming, Colorado, for several months out of the year to make a living. (Flaca, 61)

It was a confusing time for Flaca but she soon found a way to get ahead because she was good at science and mathematics. She was ridiculed due to her accent and pronunciation of words, although that did not last long. Once she became proficient in English, her advanced mathematics skills were recognized and she was promoted.

Flaca expressed her thoughts about how language barriers can affect the way abilities are perceived. Once she was in the ninth grade, she felt pride because she was in honors classes. But she soon found herself on the road with her family, traveling to the northern states for migrant work. It became a harsh realization that the “help” that the family had received to come to the United States was to have the entire family work in the fields; this was the only way they had to make a living. Flaca knew that she must perform well in school to gain an education and help her family in other ways instead of going into the fields. Education was her mission statement.

Flaca was able to continue her education while she was on the road. She had to work harder to keep up and many times studied in the truck while on the road or at nights, using a flashlight while the others slept. She could fax assignments to school so she would not be behind. Her father would take her to the supervisor’s office to fax her papers. Flaca stated that she and her father got strange looks but her perseverance paid off. While in high school, she kept up her grades and her counselor helped her to apply for a scholarship for first-generation, low-income migrant students. Her parents never stopped telling her of the importance of an education, especially as her father encouraged her studies. Flaca was excited when she received the scholarship from a private school in an urban area; at the same time she was anxious about leaving her family.

Looking back, I don’t think the counselors at my school were very good at guiding someone to college. I didn’t know what were the better schools or

anything like that. It was like, “You go to college and you choose one” and that’s it. (Flaca, 67)

Flaca visited one large university but it was too big, too many people. However, she was the first one in her family to get this opportunity and she felt that “there was a lot riding on my success.”

Astonishment overcame Flaca as she arrived at the private college. She described her life there as “hard and very upsetting; people were rude and hurtful” (Flaca, 43).

Flaca shared an experience that had hurt to the core of her spirit. She was with a group of scholarship students who went to the library to get their books as part of the scholarship (all books were provided for her first year of college). Flaca lamented on her feelings of sheer shock and hurt when she heard a librarian say,

“I hate it when these Mexicans get all their books free.” We were only a few students and we were treated differently, like the poor people of the whole university. (Flaca, 42)

The words were as if someone had cut her with a blade. She returned to her dorm and cried. She had worked hard to get into college and earn high grades, so she felt that her scholarship was just as good as anyone else’s scholarship.

She described her first year of college as going through the motions; she wanted to leave and get to a university closer to her family. She was upset and nothing at this school could help her change how she felt. Therefore, it was no surprise that, after her first year, she transferred to another university in south Texas.

In her second year, at the medium-size university, she met a professor who asked her to visit his lab. Flaca went, but was worried that she would not be good enough to work in the lab because she knew that only smart students worked in that particular lab. She volunteered to work in the lab and then, based on a referral from her professor, she was accepted into the McNair program. The pride that she had felt about her academic abilities was back. Although still facing challenges, she was motivated to succeed.

Flaca's accent seemed to bring forth misperceptions of her intellect. She recalled getting ready for a major presentation at a national conference in which she was a co-author of the publication, which would make her an undergraduate published researcher. Flaca was constantly reminded of incorrect pronunciation of words as she practiced her oral presentation. She was in danger of her oral presentation being removed, which she did not to happen. She practiced and practiced, attempting to keep calm as she was criticized for the way she pronounced the words. For example, she knew how to explain the electrophoretic titration (ET) curve but her words sounded odd due to her thick accent. Sometimes she broke down laughing until she cried because, even though the words were difficult, she was confident in her knowledge of her research and results. Success was to be hers. Flaca embraced humor in her presentation, acknowledging her accent and embracing her audience. Her presentation was a success. The language barriers that had followed her throughout her schooling made her realize that her accent made her unique. Now when she presents oral lectures for training new students in the lab, she proudly announces her unique accent and pokes fun at herself. This tactic has been extremely instrumental in helping students from other cultures, as well as Hispanic students, to embrace their unique attributes.

Flaca never faulted her parents for not having much education. She explained,

I'm only bringing you here so that you know this is not what you want to do for the rest of your life. You need to have an education so you're not in the sunlight all the time. He definitely pushed us all the time. The three of us got bachelor's and then another sister got associate. My older sisters didn't benefit from us moving; they had already left school. (Flaca, 40)

Flaca felt that her parents were smart but did not understand the educational process. Every time she went home to visit her family during her undergraduate studies, they asked her when she would finish. Flaca would smile respectfully; she did not have the nerve to tell her family that she wanted to pursue a doctoral degree. Even though

they had encouraged and supported her to get an education, they felt that she should finish her degree and come home. But Flaca had the strong desire to make her family proud and felt the motivation to continue; so she went to graduate school and then on to obtain a Ph.D.

Her doctoral journey was stressful. Flaca noticed that the students in her lab seemed very connected with each other. She felt isolated from everyone and becoming more and more anxious. After her first year in her doctoral program, Flaca went to her advisor and just broke down and stated that she did not think that she could do it. She described herself as depressed and very confused, always wondering what she was doing trying to get a doctorate. It was enough that she had a master's degree.

By this time, she had married her college sweetheart, who was in the field using his engineering degree. He did not understand her thoughts and challenges. From his perspective, his wife was smart but seemed to doubt her very ability to gain a doctorate. Flaca went home for a few days to reflect and gather her thoughts. It brought her back to her days of surviving the hot days and hours of picking crops; if she could survive that period in her life, she could survive this phase of her life. She decided that her educational endeavor was a mental test and she needed to go back to the lab. She went back to her lab and joined the others; although they might not be like her, she decided to embrace her research group and their study groups.

Flaca told herself that she was going to stop comparing herself to others. She was in a doctoral program that she had entered on her own merit. When she returned to the lab, she teamed with a peer group and was amazed how supportive everyone was. She realized that her own narrow thoughts about other people (non-Mexicans) had kept her from moving forward. The majority of the students in the lab were Taiwanese students who embraced her and shared the support that she needed. With tears in her eyes, she

expressed, “I was still that little girl from La Carreta—or that girl who stood there in the library with these ladies talking about ‘poor Mexicans.’” (Flaca, 58). She had thought that the lab group was judging her and would not accept her, when in actuality she had been judging them. Her early negative educational experience almost made her abandon her dream of becoming a researcher because of her fears.

Presently, Flaca works in postdoctoral studies at a major cancer center in Texas. She makes it a point to reach out to everyone because she remembers that scared girl with the thick accent. Now she laughs when her accent gets in the way. Flaca stated that her most prized possession is her daughter, who has the opportunity to engage in many things that Flaca had only dreamed about, such as ballet and soccer. Flaca noted that her daughter is a good soccer player. Her family is very proud of her and she helped her family by assisting them in buying them a small home, once she had a Ph.D.

What am I doing here with a committee of five doctors . . . , trying to prove my case. Not long ago I just came from La Carreta. I still can’t believe it but I got it for me and for my family. I was like, “Yes, I got this!” (Flaca, 44)

### **Elena**

Elena is 35 years old, Hispanic, married, with two children: a teenage daughter and an 8-year-old son. According to Elena, her upbringing was a typical south Texas Hispanic upbringing. She earned a Ph.D. in toxicology chemistry. She obtained immediate employment as a researcher and associate professor in a research-oriented state university in south Texas.

Elena’s educational journey began at a large flagship university. Admission to a large university was automatic because she had graduated as Valedictorian of her high school class. The scholarship procedures were never explained to Elena or to her parents, so she was glad she had qualified for financial aid. She explained that, as Valedictorian, she was failed by the educational system because they should have helped her with

scholarships because her family did not know how to help her. As a first-generation, low-income student, she was completely unprepared for attendance at any university, especially one that was large and imposing. Elena was so miserable, alone, and overwhelmed that she left school after the first semester, feeling like a total failure. She retreated to her grandmother's home and worked at a local store for a semester. All the while, she knew that she was too smart to stay in her small town and never go back to school. She knew that she should go back to school.

Memories of a childhood at home are not pleasant ones for Elena.

My life growing up was tough. We lived in a poor neighborhood; we were all poor. There was abusive behavior between my parents, weekend drinking and fighting between my father, siblings and other family and friends. (Elena, 87)

This is what Elena considered to be a “typical Hispanic family”: poor, drinking, and brawling every weekend. She recalled painfully that she wanted to get away. Eventually, Elena moved to live with her grandmother so she could help, as is the tradition in many Hispanic families. Her brothers did not want the responsibility and, as the only female, it was her responsibility. Elena was happy to do this so she could be away from her parents and closer to some of her cousins.

I was happy to be with my grandmother. I gave all the check to my mother, she would give me \$20, and I was happy with that. I never thought it was anything major. I did not care because now I was comfortable with my *abuela* [grandmother]. (Elena, 88)

It was a confusing time for her as her mother picked her up in the morning and took her to school. Her mother always seemed distant after Elena went to live with her grandmother. Elena never chose to move away.

School and studying were passions for Elena. All the way through public schools, she excelled in her classes. She took advantage of any classes that would help her learn more about science. Study was a way to escape the disruptive atmosphere that occurred frequently with her family members. Most of her family had not finished high



school, so education was not a priority. Early on, it seemed that her only salvation was to study, learn, and make the best grades possible. Elena never seemed to understand where she got this passion for learning. “I never really got any encouragement from my parents or family members. I don’t think they knew how to support me” (Elena, 102).

For many years, Elena retained the emotional discord that arose from serious issues with some of those with whom she dealt during her undergraduate years. She explained that she had been overwhelmed by what she described as a mentor who belittled her and sexually harassed her. She reported that she received support, but at a price as she made her way through the educational hurricane that swirled around her. She persevered despite what she perceived to be wrong and unjust. Elena was motivated no matter the circumstances that life dealt her. She enjoyed her time in the lab it; felt like home. But once her abusive mentor got there, it was almost as if she felt that she had to endure comments and behavior that she knew was not right.

I really wish I had put a stop to the harassment by a certain professor during my graduate years. I wish I could have experienced a real mentor, not just someone who used my hard work and then later told me I could never be a doctor. (Elena, 74)

Elena almost did not get into the doctoral program because her undergraduate mentor was the “horror” that she described. He did not support her in furthering her education. She worked hard and got several publications as a graduate student that were co-authored by this “horrible professor.” She began to realize how smart she was as her support program asked her to travel and present her research. She was also being recognized for her commitment in the lab by other faculty, who were supportive. They invited her to collaborate, despite what her professor told her; she collaborated with other faculty members who were strong, supportive, and nurturing. “Even though he indicated he wanted to support me, the tradeoff was abuse of who I am. I started to ignore him and went on to apply for the doctoral program” (Elena, 79). The professor

even went so far as to call the university and tell her new mentor that he wanted his letters of recommendation back. However, those tough years of early childhood gave her the fortitude to continue and obtain her doctorate. Elena receives satisfaction from her work in the lab and mentoring high school students.

Elena's doctoral experience was quite different from her previous graduate experience. She was in another country, where she was received as a competent scholar. She still feels lucky that she has had such great educational opportunities. Her educational support from McNair and financial support helped her to have a less stressful life. At times, it is hard to let go of some of the past, but Elena commented that she is still on the journey and does not know when it will end.

I am so proud I got the doctoral degree and sometimes I still can't believe it. I get called "Dr. Elena" and I look around and laugh because they are talking to me!  
(Elena, 76)

### **Dr. Chemist**

Dr. Chemist is a 31-year-old married female who grew up in south Texas. She is now a senior chemist with a major company. She was the first in her family to earn a Ph.D. She described her new role as mother: "I am a new mother with a 4-month-old son and have never known such happiness" (Dr. Chemist, 135). Dr. Chemist has one older brother but a very large extended family. She noted with pride and some exhilaration that she has "lots of uncles and aunts."

Education was not a priority in her family, and most family members still have not finished high school; a college degree was not even a topic for family discussion. This did not mean that her family did not support her in school. While reflecting on her years growing up, she remembered that hers was not a typical Hispanic upbringing.

I have fond memories of trips to my Catholic elementary school on my father's motorcycle. Daily routines were fairly normal—school, home, and seemingly endless hours of homework. Weekends were fun times visiting with

grandmother, cousins, family and friends. Even when surrounded by all these people, I always felt that I was somehow a little different. (Dr. Chemist, 142)

Dr. Chemist had a fascination with all things that involved education and her father appreciated and encouraged her interest. When he had days off from his job, he substituted at the local school.

So imagine the guy with the tight T-shirt and jeans and biker boots holding his helmet and walking into the school to volunteer. It was a sight, but I was so proud when I would see him at school. (Dr. Chemist, 145)

Dr. Chemist reported that she had grown up in a world of mixed messages and that her mother had distanced herself from involvement in her daughter's early school years, thinking that educational pursuits would eventually take her daughter away from home. Dr. Chemist explained that she felt that being "first generation" was in part responsible.

No one had gone to college and it meant going away from home. You have to think that my mother and aunts all wanted their children around them, so that meant no going away to college. (Dr. Chemist, 140)

Even today, Dr. Chemist's mother feels the same. Even though her mother's fears concerning the educational process have proven to be well founded in that her daughter left the area, the family has always been supportive and proud of her accomplishments. Consequently, Dr. Chemist was very confused as she grew up, and this fostered feelings of mixed messages. Guilt surrounded her educational aspirations; she did not want to appear to be insulting the family by appearing better than them. It was and is a constant struggle due to the family's expectations.

Her father encouraged thinking "outside of the box," accepting a challenge to what is considered "normal," believing that a female could enter the field of science. He stressed that humble beginnings do not limit the capacity to learn and aspire to more. He stressed that a Ph.D. is available to anyone who is willing to learn, work hard, and do

what has to be done to achieve the goal. These are messages that she felt while growing up.

Dr. Chemist maintained that she has never been consciously aware of her predilection to the sciences. She eventually became aware that she could earn a degree in chemistry. In that process she began to realize that, with work, she too could climb “out of the box” and earn a Ph.D. Thus, she began to want more.

Dr. Chemist maintained that her family’s support was the foundation of her educational pursuits. It is her opinion and firm belief that her family gave her the structure and that she then enhanced her study skills and exercised personal discipline. It is her belief that, had it not been for them, she would not have had the strength, determination, and faith in herself to continue the grueling journey. She remembered her father’s words: “Be the best at what you can be at whatever you do.”(Dr. Chemist, 138).

Dr. Chemist compared her quest for the doctoral program to the reaction profile in chemistry terms.

This is akin to a climb up and down a hill, with many smaller hills on both paths. Because of some choices, the uphill journey was stressful and difficult. Good mentoring made the downhill climb somewhat less daunting. At that point, there is another hill . . . that one is called defending. You reach the peak of the reaction and then it is the highest peak and longest downhill journey. (Dr. Chemist, 147)

A concerned and supportive husband, as well as an exceptionally good friend, assisted Dr. Chemist along some of the rough hills of her journey. While in her doctoral program, she had differences of opinion with her doctoral mentor. He led his group as if it were a competition among them and the students were always in direct conflict. It was an uncomfortable place to be and she wondered whether she had chosen the wrong course of study. After time to reflect on decisions and actions, Dr. Chemist knew that she would not have her outstandingly gratifying and successful career had she chosen

any other path. Therefore, the rough times and the competitive nature of her mentor and lab atmosphere were all worth it in the end.

Dr. Chemist and her husband were married shortly after she began her graduate program. He quickly became her primary support mechanism, not only mentally but as a physical presence as well. At times, it seemed that the family did not understand the stress involved with her journey, and she was soon finding reasons to stay away from home on weekends and holidays. She was quite content to spend her time with her husband and friends in their own home, celebrating Thanksgiving or the holidays. She attributed this attitude in some ways to her parents' divorce when she was a high school senior. Distance was a way to cope. As she traveled this path of thought, she became conscious of her feelings of withdrawal from family contact.

When Dr. Chemist began to reflect on experiences, she saw her past lives clearly. Along with a new and very successful marriage, these ingredients blended to produce a cataclysmic emotional state. Dr. Chemist mentioned that core values are the basis of being and guide all personal and professional relationships, as well as feelings and respect for all people and things. Dr. Chemist values and cherishes support by her extended family and their encouragement as she went forward toward her goal, her exceptional "best friend husband" was always there, and her professors and mentors who saw her through to her ultimate destination. Even with difficulties and some setbacks, Dr. Chemist reached her goal by receiving a Ph.D. in 5 years.

Respect, trust and honesty are the most generally accepted and appreciated of all our human values. I chose to carry these values with me and hopefully teach my child these values as he grows up. (Dr. Chemist, 141)

### **Researcher's Life Story/Narrative**

"The house does not rest upon the ground, but upon a woman." (Anonymous Mexican proverb)

The opening quote seems to exemplify my life. A special woman gave me birth and was wise enough to put me in the hands of a woman who gave me the foundation to be who I am today. This reflection is a glance of the life story of Maria Diaz Gonzalez, presented in phases that represent critical periods in my life that had an impact on the development of who I am today.

I was born December 5, 1962, in Kennedy, Texas, to Gloria Diaz, who immediately handed me over to her brother, Lucas, and his wife, Josefina Diaz. My mother told me that she walked out of the hospital with me in her arms the day I was born. My mother and father had been trying to have children for 10 years and Gloria knew that she was not in a position to raise a daughter alone. My foundation began by the strength and courage of two women. I could not have asked for a better family. Fourteen months after my adoption, my mother gave birth to my sister Palmira. It seemed ironic, considering that the doctors had told her that she could never have children. I always think about how this happened. Was it because, by adopting me, my mother's psychological state of anxiety and stress of trying to get pregnant no longer existed? For whatever reason, she always felt blessed to have two children when she had thought that she would never have any.

My childhood memories revolve around family and school. My father's oilfield job was relocated to Alice, Texas, when I was 3 years old. Once we had established ourselves, this was our home until the present day. I remember my father walking to work in the morning because we did not have a car. For the longest time, I would cry because it was dark when he left and came home and I was afraid that he would be hurt. Maybe this was the beginning of my need to be a caretaker.

My mother worked in a cafeteria at a Methodist private school, so we could attend for a reduced price in preschool. I played with the other children while my mother

cooked during the day. My first memories of my mother and father are of her when I was about 4 years old. She would always be ready with something to eat and a hug as a means of comfort. Although we never really said “I love you,” she always provided hugs, food, and a safe home. Every Sunday we walked about 10 blocks to church because my mother did not drive and my father was almost never home due to his job. Now that I think about this, we walked to the mall, to the movies, everywhere. My mother always made sure that we had the studio portraits that I still have today; she made a “big deal” about picture day and always made sure that we took pictures with Santa Claus. I have one of the last pictures (Figure 3), when I had said, “Mom, I am getting too big to do this.”



*Figure 3. My sister and I with Santa Claus.*

When my sister Pam and I were in elementary school, we walked with three friends to and from school, which was about seven blocks. To entertain ourselves at home, we played kickball outside until it got dark and our mother called us in to eat. My mother was a wonderful cook, making extensive meals. When my father was home, we all sat and ate, talked and laughed. Once a month we ate liver and onions, with my father lecturing us about eating foods that were good for us. I used to think, “My mom makes such a big deal about us four people sitting and eating; I would rather be outside.” This is ironic because now, with my two sons, I make sure that we have big holiday meals together and I tend to host the entire family, cousins and all. My mother made homemade tortillas every day for 40 years. At that time, I could eat five tortillas and never gain a pound—not so today. Still today, the smell of tortillas conjures wonderful memories of my mother. She was such an instrumental part of my life.

I went to elementary and middle school at a predominately “White” school. We were poor and our neighborhood was considered the *barrio*, so I always wondered why we went to that particular school. I later found out that it was we lived at the edge of the school district. It was different for me because I was dark and students said mean things to me. My last name was Diaz, which kids would say in English meant “days.” The kids would say, “You are Mary Nights since you are so dark.” My sister Pam did not experience this because she was fair skinned and cute. The kids also teased me about my mother’s age: Hey, Mary, is that your grandmother?” I was embarrassed when they said this because all the other kids had young mothers. (My mother was over 40 when she adopted me). In today’s world, being a mother at 40 is not on the social radar. I think that these types of incidents became my first taste of discrimination. I think about this experience from my son’s perspective on who we are in society. I always think of my youngest, sitting at the kitchen counter when he was about 5 and saying, “Mom, I told



Teacher that our family had lots of races because Rick and Dad are White, you and I are brown.” I thought this was so funny; he was referring to our shade of skin color and not race. I am glad that he is having an experience different from my early experience in school. Figure 4 shows my son before his junior prom.



*Figure 4.* My handsome son before junior prom.

I was a precocious child, always asking “why?” When I was in the sixth grade, I was taken to the principal’s office for talking in class. The school called my mother, who came to the school and told them that she would take care of me when she got me home. When I got home, she told me that getting in trouble was not going to be for us, that I was going to do well in school and go to college. I thought to myself “What is college?” She explained that a college is “where all the smart people go.” She told me that she was going to college so she could help us and that it would later help us get into college. I was so proud of my mother with her books and that she could help me with math. In

reality, she was going to night school to get a GED to help us. She attended night school at the local junior college. I always wonder how she did this because she spoke Spanish mostly. It must have been hard for her. I remember my math teacher (my mother's night school teacher) telling me my mother that she was a better student than me. It was not until I was older that I realized that she wanted to help us and help herself.

My mother was one of 13 children; she and the two oldest had to quit school in the sixth grade to help raise the others, so they were not given a choice of staying in school. Her GED certificate today still hangs on the wall in her home beside our high school diplomas.

Junior high school was not particularly eventful. It was that stage where most adolescents are preoccupied with their social status and physical attributes. In the seventh grade, I was not pretty but I was funny and a good friend. I hung out with everyone. I was focused on my school and getting into sports. During this period of my life, my mother got a job cleaning the house of a local golf pro and his artist wife. They appreciated her and often gave her extra money, which she always used to buy clothes for us because, at this age, social comparisons played a major role in self-esteem. I now realize how much she sacrificed so that we could have the best.

Once in high school, I joined the track team. I ran at school. I ran after school. I ran during school. I was lanky and very dark from being in the hot sun all the time. I played the clarinet and was one of three girls who were chosen to play in the first band because we could play well. I was considered a good clarinet player and a good track runner. My self-esteem and self-confidence began to be enhanced; I did not care that I was dark. My mother found rides to all of my band concerts and track meets; she was one of the popular mothers, and it did not matter that she was older than most of the mothers or that she could not drive.

Family and friends were a major part of my life during this time. My mother invited friends in the neighborhood to hang out with us on the weekends, have big meals, and play games. I was close to my group of girlfriends throughout high school. We always said that we would keep in touch after we graduated and parted ways. Thirty years after graduation, we still keep in touch and get together once a year to catch up on each other's lives. Since most of us were in band, we traveled together. Yes, my mother was a chaperone on our trips; although she was the oldest mother mom in my elementary school, she was the one whom we trusted, the one who went with us.

Of course, one cannot go through high school without a "first love." In ninth grade, I met my first love. He was a great friend who lived a few blocks away. He would ride his bike to see me; we were allowed to sit on the porch and talk so my mother could keep a watchful eye. Once we were in the 10th grade, I saw him talking to another girl and my heart beat so fast. I had the teenage realization that I was in love. We were such good friends and both of us wanted to make sure that we did not ruin our friendship.

At the time, we were not thinking about the future, but his mother was a step ahead of us. She was a teacher. She told me that her son was going to college and that I probably was not. She told us that we could be friends but we could not be a couple. I was so hurt. I told my mother because I really began thinking about college; I just did not know how I could get there. My mother was angry and went to the school to tell my friend's mother that her daughter was going to college and that she should be ashamed of herself, telling someone that, especially because she was a teacher.

One day my coach told me that, if I performed well in track, I could get a scholarship. I did not comprehend what she was saying; I did not understand the idea of a scholarship. My first love and "broke up" before he left for the summer to live with an

aunt out of town. I was heartbroken—for about 2 weeks. Life and high school went on as I continued to explore the idea of college.

My social life took another turn in the 11th grade. There was a dance in town that everyone went to every 2 weeks. I was not allowed to go until I finally convinced my parents to concede to my pleas. I did not and do not dance, but I was enthralled as I watched the social interaction. I was amazed by how girls dressed and how they danced. Toward the end of the night, a handsome guy in a navy uniform came up to me—the dark ugly girl—and asked me my name. We talked. I thought he was nice and I was floating on a cloud all the way home. Several weeks later, my girlfriend told me that he was asking about me and that he was about to return to his duty in the navy. I was excited but ambivalent because he was 4 years older than me. I told my friend to tell him that he could come over and meet my mother so I could talk to him. That was the wrong move. He came to my house but my father came outside and told him to leave and not come back. He left, and I sat thinking: Who was this exciting older person who I could not talk to or see? Life went on and I kept running and playing clarinet.

As I entered my last year of high school, I was doing well in band and track. I was what my coach called the “nucleus” of the team. I won district games in long jump, triple jump, and the mile relay, which meant that we went on to the regional meet. At this meet, it was fortuitous that I met some coaches from a local university. I eventually receive a track scholarship the following year. Some people at my school seemed to be surprised that I would be offered a university scholarship. When I made a score of 21 on the ACT, the principal called me in to make sure that I was the one who really got that score. Nonetheless, midyear came around and life looked pretty good and yes, college was in my future. I had the track scholarship and the ACT score. To be honest, I still did not know what I was going to do once I got to college. I remember being scared.

But then there was another curve in the road. Guess who was back in town? The handsome man on leave from the navy wanted to see me. My parents were not thrilled so I arranged to see him behind their back. My heart was captured—I fell in love for real this time. At my graduation party, I hid the fact that I was in love. I was supposed to start college in the fall semester. I could not choose love over what I had strived so hard to attain.

Eventually, I left home to elope with him. He promised me that we would go to school because he knew that it was important to me. Looking back, I now realize that I was scared to go to college and it seemed to be safer to go with him. I settled. Little did I know that he was a controlling individual and only said things that he knew I wanted to hear. He isolated me from family and friends. A few months later, I had not started college and I was pregnant. I had convinced myself that I was okay because he was not physically abusive; little did I realize that I was being emotionally abused. After about 3 months, my best friend came to see me and told me that my mother wanted me to come home. I did not ponder that motherly wisdom very long. I went home; my mother said, “You are having this baby and you are going to college.” That is exactly what I did. The handsome guy had another girl and another baby along the way within the year. Good for them!

I was saved by my wise and loving mother. My son and mother moved with me to San Antonio to start college. My father was not happy, but it was only temporary; my mother eventually went home. I worked at two jobs and went to school full time. My work at Marshall Fields and at a bank gave me transient skills that proved to be beneficial later. I was proud of myself and felt good; but having a child at 19 made me feel old and tired all the time. When my son was born, I was happy to be blessed with a beautiful baby. He was the best thing that could have happened to me. I made a promise

to myself then and there that I would get my degree for him. I did not want him to have to struggle because of my shortsighted decisions.

During my last semester of college, my mother became extremely ill. She had tuberculosis, so I stayed home to take personal care of her for 6 months. She was very weak, and medications were numerous. I also worked at the local school where I had enrolled my son. I had to quit college for a semester and move back to Alice, but it was only a detour. I talked to an advisor at the local university to see whether I could transfer and graduate at the university. I did not get to run track in college, but in two semesters, I had a degree: Bachelor of Business Administration in Management. The next year, 1990, I earned a second degree: Bachelor in Finance. During this time, I never stopped working full time. My financial aid had not come through due to my transferring so quickly and south Texas jobs were not as abundant as in the city. In fact, I have worked full time since I was 19 years old, partly due to having a son at that age and needing to have income.

Once I was admitted to the local university, I was fortunate to work with a summer workforce program teaching mathematics to children from the local King Ranch. A vice president of the university saw me working with the students and asked me what I was going to do after the summer. I told him truthfully that I was not sure but needed to work to survive and that I was enjoying working with the students and helping them to develop needed skills. He asked me to look up some data for him for a grant proposal that he was writing and to work with his office a few weeks.

The job ended, but unknown to me, my life was about to take a pivotal turn. Simultaneously, I was offered a teaching job at a school district and contacted by the university. The grant had been funded. I had a job for 4 years! I loved this. I was young and had a burning desire to learn as much as possible. I went to conferences regarding

the program and asked questions—but this time I did not get sent to the principal! I wanted to know why universities were awarded grants, what criteria they met, and how we could apply for additional grants. I also volunteered to read grants, which helped me to understand the writing process. I was a sponge and a young professional in a world of opportunities.

Then another relationship came into my life. This time it was with someone who held the same values about education, family, and work ethics. We married in 1992. In 1993 I had my second son, Romeito, as the family calls him. My older son was now 11 years old.

During the next 10 years I worked with a supportive mentor who helped me to learn the compassionate side of grant writing, which contains the heart of what we can do with funds for low-income and first-generation students in south Texas. I was good at getting with the financial aspects and she was good at getting to the heart of the problem and motivating her staff to commit time and effort. I liked data; percentages are compelling when put together in tables to explain who goes to college, who persists. This explains my 22 years of working for those less fortunate and still loving that I help and support students to change the course of their lives and those of generations to come.

I earned a Master's degree in psychology, with a minor in sociology. When I talk about my educational pursuits, I always say that I got the business degrees but needed the master's degree in psychology and sociology to learn about myself and to get along with people. It sounds funnier when I say it aloud.

A picture is worth a thousand words. My father was overwhelmed at my graduation; he cried throughout the ceremony. He denied it, but my mother kept getting after him. He looked like he was crying in all the photos (Figure 5).

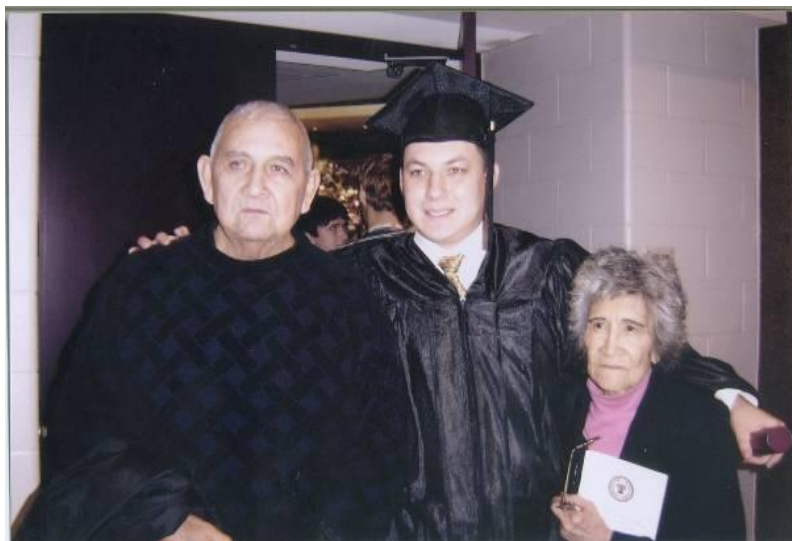


*Figure 5. My parents with me at my graduation.*

In 1999, my supervisor announced that she would be retiring in 2000. I was scared and wondered who would be my new boss. Little did I know that my supportive mentor had given her blessing for me to take over the department. At the same time my wonderful son was graduating high school and had been accepted to Texas A&M in College Station. This was a decision that he had made during a visit that we took together for me to enroll in my graduate program. I was proud of him and he was proud of me. We had gone through many trials and tribulations as a single mom who was working and going to school and her son, but our faith and perseverance had prevailed.

In 2004 my son graduated from Texas A&M University and my mother, who had been instrumental in helping me to raise him in his early years, was front and center (Figure 6). We were all very so proud. I recalled that, when I drove to College Station for my coursework, my mother made sure that she went with me to stay at his apartment and cook for his roommates, as well as clean the apartment and wash his clothes. He and





*Figure 6. My parents and my son, graduation 2004.*

his friends always welcomed her. I thought it was funny how much she got from their need to have home cooking and cleaning. I truly believe that this was what she lived for—we needed her. I still need her.

My supervisor retired in 2000, and I took over the department with my predecessor's blessing. I told the administration that I would commit, and the outcome was successful. The retention of existing grants and several new grants solidified my grant-writing abilities. Although I was sort of a caretaker, keeping everyone happy was difficult for me. I recall the day that I realized that two directors were mismanaging student funds. I expected them to do the right thing but, much to my chagrin, they did not. I terminated them.

Little did I know that they would come after me with a vengeance. They wrote letters to the federal government, and it seemed that everyone came to audit me. The audits were laborious, but all came out well. The experience reinforced the philosophy of doing the right things for the right reasons. My tenure with this department has

strengthened me professionally and personally. I hope to continue with this journey of learning throughout my life.

My beautiful and strong mother passed away in 2007; with her, she took a part of my heart. At first, I was tough and handled everything. I grieved deeply because I always felt that I could have done more and maybe she would still be here. I was at my office when my cell phone vibrated repeatedly; it was a stranger telling me to get to the hospital because my mother had been taken to a hospital. She was unconscious and my father was too upset to call me. I went to her side and she asked me where my older son was and I told her that he was coming. She was unconscious for a day and my son came from Washington late that night. He prayed and cried at her bedside and he held her hand. Her monitor was responsive for a while; she gripped his hand as tears flowed down her face. Then she went to heaven.

I know people always say these things happen at the end and I never really believed it, but I saw it and it brings me to tears to think and write about it now. Although he was my son, she was as much his mother as mine. She was our foundation. I am so thankful that she and my father were together for 50 years; she was his soul mate. I know this because, after we buried her, we sat in my car in the parking lot, both of us crying because we did not know what to do without her bossing us. That was when stated, “She was my soul mate.” (See Figure 7.)

She was 4 feet 10 inches tall, but she was a giant in our eyes. My father now lives with me and I find myself trying to make things easier for him because I feel guilty about being gone at times. We were at her gravesite Easter Sunday, and I wrote part of my story there with her. As time goes by, I find myself thinking of her and asking what would she do in certain situations.



*Figure 7. My parents, April 17, 1993.*

That sense of family and responsibility is strong and it has taken on a new light as I experience middle adulthood. My younger son, who is a senior in high school, has also decided to attend a major university. The cycle continues and I hope to instill in him the resilience to handle life and the perseverance for education.

Travelling down this winding road on my journey to my doctorate degree has had bumps, stops, and false starts but always there is a shining light. That light, I believe, is my mother guiding me as she always has to the dream that she had for me—and that I have for myself. I believe that the university is the guidepost and, as a student, I am an active participant.

If I were asked what education should give, I would say it should offer the breadth of view, ease of understanding, tolerance for others, and a background from which the mind can explore any direction. Education should provide the tools for a widening and deepening of life, for increased appreciation of all one sees or experiences. It should equip a person to live life well, to understand what is happening about him, for to live life well one must live with awareness. (L'Amour, 1990, p. 123)

I hope that I can live the remaining of my life with awareness and make contributions.

My house rests upon this woman (Figure 8) and upon the woman I strive to be.



*Figure 8. My mother in 1938.*

### **Participants' Pictures to Symbolize Their Journey to the Doctorate**

In addition to interviews, I also asked each of the participants to identify a picture that symbolized his or her personal journey to the doctorate. The graphic data along with direct quotes from the participants explaining the meaning of each picture provide additional understanding of the lived experience of each participant in this study.

#### **Anton Velez Martinez**

I had so many struggles trying to get to the other side. I could not see the light. I encountered one thing after another. First my parents, then my mentor, then I realized that the bar was high and I wanted to be my best. Everyone wanted the best for me that life has to offer. That is when I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. (Anton Velez Martinez, email correspondence, November 17, 2012; Figure 9)



*Figure 9. Anton: The light at the end of the tunnel.*

### **Elena**

In my home life was a hurricane waiting to knock down my foundation. The world of academia saved me. My perseverance against the odds I see as the house that stood its ground despite the hurricane. (Elena, email correspondence, December 7, 2011; Figure 10)

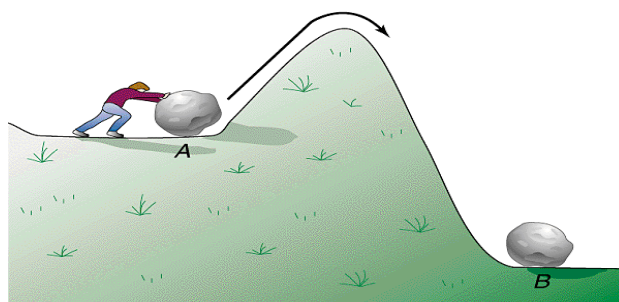


*Figure 10. Elena: The hurricane.*

### **Dr. Chemist**

In chemistry, there's this thing that we call reaction profile. You start at the bottom and then you climb up a hill and then that's like what we call the transition phase. Then after the transition, you fall down to the bottom again. So it's like a hill. And I would classify my doctoral journey as a whole bunch of these hills. You get into graduate school and then you got to climb the hill. It takes a lot of energy to climb up that hill. The ones who made it up the hill, and you can

see that it's going to be downhill from there, then it gets a little easier. (Dr. Chemist, email correspondence, December, 2011; Figure 11)



*Figure 11. Dr. Chemist: The hills.*

### **Flaca Migrante**

I am still that girl from “La Carreta.” This committee, scholars, surrounds me and they are all Ph.D.’s and they look at me like, “Tell us what you know.” I think about being back in the fields and helping my mother. So now, I think I’m sure they have their story as well. I discuss my research and my dedication and now we are all in the room, still different but the same. This picture is still who I am. My journey encompasses me. (Flaca Migrante, email correspondence, January 6, 2012; Figure 12)



*Figure 12. Flaca Migrante: “Mother’s Helper” by Diego Rivera.*

**Dr. Teacher**

I spent so much time intimidated by the very accomplishment that I wanted my whole life. I wanted to feel like a big fish in a small pond; in reality, I was a small fish in the sea of life. Few people like me start and even fewer get through. This picture represents my journey. (Dr. Teacher, email correspondence, October 16, 2011; Figure 13)



*Figure 13.* Dr. Teacher: A small fish in the large sea.

**Laura**

I chose the Celtic tree because my journey started with my roots, who I am: a female, first-generation Hispanic. I am the daughter of parents. I have a family and they are part of my branches and my husband. My journey is deeply rooted for me and my family. (Laura, email, February 26, 2012; Figure 14)



*Figure 14.* Laura: *Mi familia* tree.



**Maria Gonzalez**

I am driven by the woman who loved me unconditionally and her light is my journey. The journey is more than the text itself. This picture describes the struggles, the challenges, the commitment, and the light. The light sustains me. I am motivated; hence, I progress forward to help myself and ultimately to give light to those that come after me. (Maria, researcher; Figure 15)



*Figure 15. Maria: My journey and guiding light.*

The pictures chosen by the participants were powerful and served as a data collection tool to understand the journey of each participant. The combined messages are strong indications that family and the individual person that each participant was in early life and the person that he or she became on the journey are intertwined in their lived experiences.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter reported the experiences of doctoral journey of six first-generation Hispanic students. These participants often experienced an overlap of their educational aspirations and their personal lives. Some experiences had a negative impact on the participants and prompted them to develop resiliency and to recommit to their education.



The participants' experiences occurred within the context of their role as a student, their personal lives, and the journey to the doctorate.

## CHAPTER V

### RESULTS AND THEMES

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of six first-generation Hispanic students who had obtained a doctoral degree (PhD or EdD). A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was adopted within a naturalistic inquiry framework (Creswell, 1994, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The study was designed to address one research question: *What are the experiences of first-generation Hispanic students with their doctoral journey?*

The five major themes presented in this chapter illuminate the participants' lived experiences and the context in which major themes emerged through constant comparison of the interviews, research notes, and the researcher's personal observations. Direct quotes from the interviews are provided to illustrate major themes. Each quote is identified by a code (e.g. Anton, 110), indicating the index card where the direct quote was located. Appendix H illustrates the system that was used to extract key phrases from the interviews to develop the themes.

I conducted the data analysis using content analysis method, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The technique involves "taking constructions gathers from the context and reconstructing them into meaningful whole" (p. 133). Phenomenological research is the study of lived experiences that "are related to each other like motifs in the andante of a symphony" (Dilthey, 1985, p. 227). Dilthey referred to "structure" (p. 228) as something that belongs to a particular lived experience (like a pattern or unit of meaning) and that becomes part of a system of contextually related experiences, explicated from it through a process of reflection on its meaning.

On initial analysis, I had numerous themes, but as I compared interviews, I refined the themes and incorporated two subthemes. At times, I walked away; upon returning to the data, I gained further clarity in data analysis. I noticed the emerging structure for the participants by the procedures for the study but more important the constant comparison of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). However, as I delved into the data, I realized that the same themes appeared regardless of the specific lived experience of the participant. Each participant had his or her own challenges and each shaped his or her own story. The participants provided the rich and thick descriptive data to contextualize the study and produce the emergent themes. Table 3 contains the most frequently mentioned words and phrases upon which the four themes were built.

Data analysis resulted in four structural themes of the stories/narratives shared by the six participants despite their different disciplines and different geographical locations. As is consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological studies, I incorporated my own lived experience as a first-generation Hispanic doctoral student. My story served as a triangulation strategy to allow readers to make comparisons between my participants and me and to understand my positionality as a researcher.

Using semistructured questions (Appendix D), I conducted two rounds of face-to-face interviews and an additional follow-up email for clarification and member checking. I treated each participant as a case and conducted single-case and cross-case analyses to discover four major themes and 10 subthemes. Table 4 summarizes findings from the data.

### **Theme 1: Support Systems**

According to Merriam-Webster (2011), support systems are “a network of people who interact and remain in informal communication for mutual assistance; a network of people who provide an individual with practical or emotional support” (p. 2). Often,

Table 3

*Summary of Key Words Related to Emergent Themes*

Theme 1 Support systems	Theme 2 Personal attributes	Theme 3 Identity struggles	Theme 4 Social structure
Family support	Internal drive	Struggles	Socioeconomic
Sacrifice/education	Motivation	First-generation	Hispanic culture
Life lessons	Individual needs	Lack of college	Family influence
Encouragement	Self-driven	Poor Hispanic	Family expectations
Spouse support	Short-term goal	Discrimination	Work ethic
Better life	Long-term goal	Limited English	Gender role
Knowledge	Resilient	Low education	Helping family
Mentoring	Life changing	Obligations	Going home
Research support	Challenges	High expectations	Not good enough
Peer support	College material	Low expectations	Fearful/inferior
Faculty support	Potential succeed	Academic world	Confusing times
Support programs		Family work	A different world

people have a collection of support systems and draw on that support mechanism depending on the situation or life event. Strong support for educational goals by low-income and first-generation parents often reflects their belief that an education is the ticket to fulfilling the American dream.

### **Family Support**

My parents told me that we always need to do something to better ourselves and one of the ways to do that was to go to college. They supported me always, so I needed to do well. (Dr. Teacher, 2)

Table 4

*Overview of Emergent Themes*

Major themes	Subthemes
1. Support systems	Family support Faculty support Academic support programs
2. Personal attributes	Being self-motivated Being resilient Being goal driven
3. Identity struggles	Cultural identity Cultural conflicts (dual identity, family expectations)
4. Socialization struggles	Struggling to “fit in” Feeling inferior (socioeconomic status)

As revealed by that quote, the participants’ stories indicated that parents were supportive of their education and that this support influenced their perception of the value of education in a positive manner during formative years and early life of the participants. When asked about the role of her family in her educational journey, Flaca recalled,

My father was more supportive . . . I guess my mother was busy with all of us taking care of us. She used to tell us that when we were working in the fields that they were only taking us there to show us that this is not what we needed to do. We needed to go to college. (Flaca, 41)

Among all participants, a common acknowledgement was that families provide meaningful support even if it is often beyond their understanding. Dr. Teacher offered the following perspective,

I would get the support from my family always, and they always pushed me to do it [education]. They never told me no, never told me no. They [family] were always there. (Dr. Teacher, 7)

The verbal affirmation by family members created a general support for their education, as well as the importance of doing well in school and getting an education. Flaca offered, “My father was always pushing towards education. He always reminded me the reason we came to the United States was for us to get an education” (Flaca, 37). Flaca’s memory of her father’s struggle to get the family to the United States was the ultimate encouragement. She continued to recalled that message today.

While Laura received encouragement from teachers throughout her high school experience, she always thought about her family support. She explained that, early in her life, her parents wanted her to excel in school so she would not have work in the fields when she grew up. Her parents supported her irrevocably, even though her mother did not speak English. Her parents sat through her freshmen orientation without understanding the presentation in English. Laura recalled that, when the Spanish-speaking professional approached them, the floodgates of communication were open for Laura’s mother.

My mom started rattling off her support of me and the university. Going on and telling her to call my parents if I misbehaved. I was mortified but the Director of Outreach just smiled and listened to my mother. (Laura, 165)

Laura recalled her father’s pride when she received a letter of acceptance into the doctoral program. She recalled his comments: “*Mija* (daughter), you will do well and hopefully you can help me with my diabetes when you finish” (Laura, 162). Laura tried to explain to her father that she was going to get a doctoral degree, not become a medical doctor.

Similarly, Dr. Chemist’s parents did not have a high school diploma but they valued education.

Even though my parents didn’t go to college, I saw them as kind of like the foundation. Without them, I don’t think I would have been so determined to do well and go to college. (Dr. Chemist, 147)

All the participants but Elena gave credit to their fathers by noting a strong level of support that they offered either by words or actions. Dr. Chemist noted that her father had encouraged her to acquire knowledge in science well beyond the norm for children at her age. “He had encouraged me to do things that do not necessarily conform to normal standards, read all the time” (Dr. Chemist, 145). Dr. Chemist’s parents were her initial support for education throughout her early years. Dr. Chemist’s father volunteered at the school during her elementary years.

My dad was really involved in making sure that I was always doing my homework right after school. He would pick me up on his motorcycle and make sure I took home all my homework. (Dr. Chemist, 143)

Dr. Chemist explained that her father was not the regular type of father. He came to the school, picked her up on his motorcycle with his biker boots and helmet, while her mother provided financial support by working outside the home.

Flaca shared a similar experience.

I guess he [father] really realized that we were not going to get an education at all, like my other older sisters didn’t get one. So he knew he needed to get us to leave Mexico and get to the U.S. to get an education even though they didn’t even speak English. My father found a place for us to live and came to the United States when I was 11 years old. (Flaca, 29)

Anton’s parents supported him in the day-to-day aspects of life. It is interesting that, when his parents were divorced when he was approximately 13 years old, the support changed once the dynamics of the family changed. Parents often used their own experiences as a way to encourage the participants to use education to improve their lives. At times, support was felt and not articulated verbally. Anton explained this.

They [parents] didn’t go to college so they couldn’t understand, especially college. They didn’t get it. I know they supported the notion of college and it was just never said directly to me. I felt it though, especially when I was little. (Anton, 82)

The support at times came when participants were engaged in their doctorate journey, as evidenced in the following statement made by Dr. Chemist.

My parents were very far away, so I would just talk to them on the weekend. So I think they really understood what I was kind of going through at times. They would say supportive stuff, as, “You are so smart, you will be alright.” (Dr. Chemist, 144)

Having migrated from Mexico to the United States at a young age, Flaca remembered that her father’s outlook on education was a valued goal to pursue. Flaca’s parents encouraged her to seek help from her teachers, knowing that they could not provide direct academic support. According to Flaca, her father encouraged her intellectual growth early on, as did Dr. Chemist’s father as described above. Flaca stated,

My dad, he seemed smart. He brought us over from Mexico knowing that my sisters didn’t get to get an education. He wanted to know what was going on with me. I remember him pushing me to read and read things that were above my reading level, which was funny because he didn’t know much about books and stuff. (Flaca, 19)

The participants unanimously agreed that their parents were unable to provide them with detailed and specific guidance when it pertained to their academic journey. The reason most often cited for this was the parents’ low level of education and lack of understanding of the type of support needed for pursuing a doctoral degree. Anton offered his interpretation of parental support in his younger years: “They never pushed the issue.”

As far as school, they didn’t go to college so they couldn’t understand, especially when I got to college. They couldn’t help me with my homework when I was in high school. I would do it by myself, though I knew they supported me. (Anton, 82)

Two of the participants elaborated the support within the family structure that did not always come in the form of a mother or father. In Elena’s case the support came from her grandma (*abuela*) and in Anton’s case his aunt (*tia*) and later his grandmother with whom they chose to live. Elena said, “My *abuela* was there for me and supported me even when I flunked out [of college], she wanted me to go back to school” (71).

Anton recalled, “Once I moved with my aunt, the tension was gone and I felt support” (117). After 2 years living with his aunt, Anton went to live with his



grandmother, as did Elena during her childhood. Anton recalled the emotional and financial support that his grandmother provided.

She was alone and I was alone. Living with her was a comfort and she was always very supportive. Many times, it came by her cooking and giving me advice. She would always listen. (Anton, 211)

Anton made sure to give credit to his entire family as a vital support for his success in completing his doctoral degree. Although Anton's parents were divorced, he received valuable additional family support from his aunt and grandmother. Anton also indicated that his parents were continually supportive, although it was difficult during the first few years for him to relate to the dissolution of his parents' relationship.

Dr. Chemist, like Elena and Anton, noted that divorce or family problems affected the dynamics of family support for education. Three participants cited the family crisis as a major change in their life. Nonetheless, familial support continued. In Dr. Chemist's case, for example, she received support from two households, which at times split the family and proved to be difficult for her on her journey. Anton shared similar feelings:

All was good till junior high my parents got divorced at that time and things were not really functioning so I decided to move with my aunt. Then I didn't really have any educational support from family. I would rely on myself. (Anton, 107)

Anton explained that during this time he felt alone and it was a time when he resented that his parents would divorce. He tried to make the best out of the turmoil but eventually decided to live with his aunt. Anton said that he always felt that he was the cause of tension between his parents once they were divorced, but he made sure to reiterate that they supported him. Anton's *tia* became his new support system.

In his senior year, Anton moved in with his grandmother when his grandfather passed away. It worked out well for him and his grandmother was a big support for him upon entering the university. He stated in his follow-up statements,

It was a positive thing being from a “typical” Hispanic family because we take care of each other. My grandma was getting older and she lived with me and my aunt but when she moved to her house she was alone. I moved in with her, I had freedom and she loved taking care of me and I took care of her. She is one grandma, I owe and credit my success. (Anton, 111)

Anton’s family change was also experienced by Dr. Chemist,

When they [parents] got divorced, it was right before high school. They argued all the time, so the education thing was not really talked about that much any more. Though I knew they supported me, it was odd. I made it a point to do well. They would be proud and get along and it made me happy for a bit. (Dr. Chemist, 142)

Elena’s parents did not get a divorce but the family situation at home made it difficult for her to understand that her parents were supportive. The weekend fights and drinking overshadowed the support that her parents provided to her. As the only female in her family, Elena always felt it was her responsibility to take care of the other family members. Also, Elena needed to do well in school and stay in school. Elena felt that, due to her family problems, she ended up receiving additional support from her grandmother.

Though my parents did not get divorced, I ended up living with my grandmother, which was actually a relief from all the fighting in our house. My grandmother added to the support as she did not want me to live an abusive life like her daughter. I needed to rely on me. (Elena, 80)

Support by spouses and peers became important as participants navigated their way through graduate programs. Anton explained that his wife and other students in the lab gathered during the breaks to take part in big meals, which was an important support of his life throughout his doctoral program.

I had met my wife and we were very serious and knew we were going to get married. We actually got married the summer before we went to the doctoral program. So that kind of changed the dynamics too because now she was my biggest support. During my doctoral program she was always there for me. (Anton, 113)

Dr. Chemist and Flaca were both appreciative of the support that their husbands provided. They explained that their husbands were extremely supportive during the most intense periods of their doctoral journeys. Both women had long-term boyfriends

throughout their undergraduate years in college and eventually married their respective boyfriends while in the doctoral programs.

Once I married my husband, he was always there for me when I had lows and wanted to quit. He would push me and support me. (Dr. Chemist, 103)

Flaca had a child during her doctoral program and her husband was instrumental in her getting through this period in her life.

Arturo [husband] was very supportive of me starting it [the doctoral program]. Through the process he was very understanding and supportive. (Flaca, 29)

During Flaca's period of emotional distress after the birth of her daughter, her husband was vital in helping her to look for ways to stay in the program and finish her degree.

Dr. Teacher articulated the important role that spouses play in the path along the doctoral journey:

Thank God for my wife. She is a teacher, so she understands the education piece. I would not have been able to make it without her support. (Dr. Teacher, 19)

It was comforting for Dr. Teacher to know that his wife, working in the education field, would understand the educational demands of his doctoral degree as she also worked in the education field. Laura, who met her husband while in her doctoral program, initially resisted his support based on her focused career path. Once they married, he was her main support as she navigated her last 2 years of her doctoral journey.

I knew that he would be supportive and many times, I was the one that held back my tears. He always understood even though he was trying to get his degree. I don't know what I would have done without him. (Laura, 165)

Despite the fact that he was working toward a medical degree, Laura's husband was the primary cook and caretaker of their children while she was in the program.

During Elena's doctoral journey the support that she received was not verbal; many times, lack of verbal support can be a form of absent support. Consequently, guilt may transpire, as was the case with Elena.

I have two children and my husband's lack of ever verbally supporting me made me believe this was almost a lack of approval. He would ignore me. But now I think back and he took care of the kids when I traveled to work on my project for my doctorate degree. So he supported me. (Elena, 68)

As Elena reflected on her journey, she admitted that family support had been very important in her early years. In her doctoral program it was important that her children support her as well by being able to travel with her when she had to go to another country to finish her final defense. Elena remembered having to get her children's passports and making sure that they understood how important it was for them to go and see her graduate. Elena now realized how important this was.

How crazy is life because now my [daughter] wants to be a scientist and travel to conduct her research. I hope my early exposure helped her because I plan to support her like she supported me, but she can't travel out of the country right now; she is still in high school. (Elena, 71)

Although my intention with the participants was to provide narratives/stories to understand their journeys, it was obvious that this required participants to reflect about the experience and their family support, not just recall the event. This process brought additional rich and thick data to utilize in the study.

### **Faculty Support/Mentoring**

The majority of the professors there all encouraged me to go to graduate school. I did a summer research program outside of my school at a larger university and those professors told me, yes, go to graduate school. (Dr. Teacher, 17)

The participants described some critical support of faculty and/or committee members who helped them to overcome obstacles. These obstacles may or may not be directly related to the academic aspect of the doctoral journey. According to the participants, it was especially helpful that faculty recognized their potential and offered encouragement and support. This can make the distinctive difference in motivating first-generation Hispanic students to continue their education and the critical stages of getting a doctoral degree. The participants recalled of times when critical support was received.

Anton had some financial difficulties in college and, because money was a factor, he had to find ways to make ends meet to continue his education.

I was so excited about continuing my education and I had met my future wife so I knew I needed to ensure funding for my graduate education. My mentor in the lab was wonderful, she was like family. She understood that I was embarrassed that I needed to worry about money. I remember working at a summer camp while I was waiting to get my offer from my doctoral acceptance. The summer job helped jump start my move out of state. (Anton, 107)

Anton initially wondered why his mentor devoted time and effort to help him with a job and help him along his journey toward the doctoral degree. Apparently, the mentor recognized his potential and thus provided a “safety net” along the way. During his doctoral journey, Anton came to realize that sometimes support comes in the form of challenges. His initial thoughts about faculty support became a complex source of confusion in the lab. Anton was drawn to a faculty member who was Hispanic; he was deflated when he was not accepted in his Hispanic faculty member’s lab. Instead, his Hispanic role model referred him to a lab with a Chinese mentor who Anton was convinced hated him. A typical day for Anton went like this:

He [Chinese faculty] would yell at me and question everything I did. I wanted to walk out and quit but the more he pushed me the more I stayed in the lab. Later I would see him and he would say something crazy like, “Hey, did you see the game last night?” I came to realize that he challenged me to make me the best. (Anton, 110)

Anton later realized that his Chinese mentor was preparing him for his current post-doctoral position. Anton’s experience in the lab assisted him in becoming a leader in his current role as a postdoctoral student helping to train graduate students.

Dr. Chemist stated that faculty mentoring were critical to her on her doctoral journey.

Good mentoring made the downhill climb somewhat less daunting. At that point, there is another hill . . . that one is called *defending*. My journey was filled with these hills and many times the faculty I worked with were critical for me to get to the other side. (Dr. Chemist, 147)

Dr. Chemist shared that on her doctoral journey her mentor and she were not always in the same vein of communication. Dr. Chemist knew that her faculty advisor's expertise was essential for her career development. Although she did not agree with her mentor's technique in the lab, which stressed competitive approaches, Dr. Chemist took away from her experience the skill development and time in the lab learning valuable skills.

As Flaca explained, many years after a humiliating experience in her freshmen year of college, she was always hesitant in front of others. Flaca was content just getting the education but it is vital that scientists be able to work with a committed group during their graduate years. Flaca's observations in her doctoral lab were that all of the Taiwanese students had much support and ate together, studied together, and had access to resources of Taiwanese students who had come before them. Flaca was the only Hispanic student in the program. Flaca was now a new mother to a daughter and she was trying to push forward with her research. She needed some support. So she went to speak with the administrator and explained,

"I need to be out for a week or two because I am so overwhelmed and I think I am depressed. I know I can do the work but since I had my baby, I think maybe I need to go to the doctor and get some medicine." The administrator told me to quit because the program was not for me. I could not believe her. I left in tears and went to the lab. (Flaca, 61)

Flaca's acceptance of support was a critical turning point in her doctoral program. As a result, she benefited from the support and encouragement of her Taiwanese peers and mentor. Today, they work side by side in the lab conducting research in a cancer clinic that saves lives.

After Elena's departure from the large university setting, she came to the rural university and was noticed by a reputable biology professor. Her professor advised her to come and work in his lab.

He told me that I might want to go and work in his lab. Everyone knew that only smart students worked in his lab. I was still bothered that I didn't make it at the other university. I thought, "Maybe I am smart!" So I went to the lab and started conducting research, which changed my life. (Elena, 65)

Elena on her journey has also dealt with abusive and manipulative behavior by the same faculty mentor whom she trusted. She knew that this was her only opportunity in life so she suffered in silence until she left to her doctorate program.

All of the participants expressed that, as undergraduates, their interaction with program-affiliated faculty members supported them on their educational pursuits. As Anton noted, "I can reach for someone like my role model and mentor who paved the way for me to pursue the doctorate" (111). Flaca also noted the influence of McNair Program-affiliated faculty and this mentor's personal interest in the following:

Dr. Saenz [pseudonym] helped me gain confidence. I doubted myself so much. My faculty mentor helped clarify things for me and his support was so helpful. (Flaca, 59)

Anton stated that his two lab mentors were instrumental in helping him to learn the critical legwork needed for his aspirations and goal of a doctorate. His mentors provided vital support during his transition to the graduate school by offering advice and letters of support.

The mentor for me acted as a liaison between the academics and the research and the process of getting into the graduate program. I had a small area I called my office and it was a way for him to keep an eye on me. To make sure I was making progress but to be supportive as well. (Anton, 111)

Dr. Teacher shared that during his undergraduate years he considered his advisor as his mentor, at one point taking a course with him. While in the course he got back a paper from one intense assignment; his advisor told him that he was doctorate material. This statement as, Dr. Teacher explained, was the support that he needed.

Dr. Green [pseudonym] putting PhD potential on my paper got me to think about trying to pursue a doctoral degree. Then of course, I was intrigued and because of that, I've been persistent. (Dr. Teacher, 16)

Later in his doctoral program, Dr. Teacher was overwhelmed and did not feel that he was competent to complete the doctoral coursework. He shared that many of the other students were older and had careers, while he was a graduate assistant. A faculty mentor spent time with him, helping him to explore his scholarly ability along his doctoral path. Dr. Teacher offered the following example.

Dr. Green [pseudonym] told me to write an abstract for a project that I was hoping to use as my dissertation. I procrastinated and one day he told me, “It is due; do it or don’t but if you don’t give me anything, I can’t help you. (Dr. Teacher, 14)

When he finally submitted the abstract of his project to Dr. Green, it required little revision. Dr. Teacher reflected on his procrastination and lack of confidence. At the time the abstract was due, Dr. Teacher did not realize that he was simply unaware of the direction to take in his new academic journey. He was not sure why he felt that way but was aware of his tendency to react in this manner at times. Dr. Teacher credited the faculty mentors for helping him to maintain momentum and confidence during his doctoral program.

Flaca recalled her time spent in the lab and learning the necessary techniques and developing the skills needed to apply later in her educational journey.

The research time spent in the lab with Dr. Saenz was so valuable and helped me get into the major research that I conduct now as a post doc. I learned about the “hidden” things you are never told about labs, research and publications. I was lucky to get two publications before I graduated with my bachelor’s. I saw my faculty mentor through and all the work it took to write articles. It helped me with my own career and I could always call her when I needed to ask her questions. (Flaca, 61)

Flaca identified her experience as an important factor to her persistence in her studies throughout her journey. She also articulated the support that she received that helped her to make career choices.

My faculty mentor gave me advice about where to apply. I wanted to stay locally and both my mentors encouraged me to apply elsewhere to get a well-rounded experience. (Flaca, 69)



Laura reiterated in her interview the importance of mentors and how their influence can transcend into helping with personal issues at times, such as her not having a driver's license until she was a senior in college.

I got the letter and opened it and thought, "Wow, I got in!" And then my second thought was, "Oh, my god, I don't have a driver's license!" My mentor took me driving for 3 weeks till I could take the test. She helped me so much with my lab research as my mentor, but was also there for me in my personal time of need. (Laura, 149)

Anton is conducting postdoctoral work; he proudly explained that his new mentor, who is Canadian, is a well-respected researcher from Harvard University and commented that he is fortunate to be working with this mentor in his lab. Anton noted that a good mentor does not have to be from the same ethnicity. He realized that good and effective faculty mentors come in all genders and races.

Faculty members sometimes became like family members for the participants throughout their journey. Each participant stays in touch with the faculty who influenced his or her life lives along the journey.

### **Academic Support Programs**

Having been in the McNair program, they gave me the stipend to allow me time to work in the lab and get my skills down. When I got to my doctoral program, I was a bit more experienced than the others were in the lab. The program experiences helped me prepare myself. (Anton, 100)

Anton said that the Ronald E. McNair Scholars program in which he took part during his junior and senior years assisted him in acquiring critical instrumentation skills in the lab and receiving mentoring from faculty with expertise in his field of interest. These skills would be vital in his doctorate program. The Ronald E. McNair scholars program was incorporated in the participant's doctoral journey due to the mission of the program, which fosters motivated students in doctoral programs. The participants wanted to succeed despite mounting obstacles due to their status as first generation and socioeconomic status. They simply did not know how. The support provided by the

program for highly motivated students, like the study participants, allowed them to work directly with faculty mentors, gain a summer research experience with a stipend, and engage in scholarly activities. The support offered to Laura was best described in the statement below.

Jessica [pseudonym] helped me in the McNair program with my research and the research that I did during the summer has helped me with my masters, helped me with my thesis project. So, all the help that came from Texas have really been there for me and they're the reason why I got my doctoral degree. (Laura, 135)

Anton discussed the importance of an undergraduate academic support program.

I credit and wrote many times and told many people that McNair and the toxins lab paved the way for me to pursue the most challenging type of degree. A supportive program that's what started this thing. McNair was by luck. If I wouldn't have gotten in McNair, I wouldn't have gotten in the lab. To be honest, the faculty told me I was "wishie washie," but the program got me focused. (Anton, 91)

Anton reported that his career interest and priorities were clarified because of the lessons that he learned in his undergraduate studies while participating in the McNair program. He wanted the doctoral degree once he knew the path. According to the participants, the support program staff became their educational family. In this regard, Anton stated,

The people from McNair were a family kind of atmosphere. They were educational support for me. This was my first experience of support in a long time. (Anton, 96)

For some participants, the lack of awareness regarding higher education contributed to a lack of further education. Dr. Chemist credited the program for navigating her to faculty mentors that opened their labs to her because; on her own, she had struggled with getting into a lab.

I was ready to conduct research but it was surprising that labs are hard to get into especially as an undergraduate student. You really need to be in a program or get guidance from someone. There should be a central office for students to get guidance and referrals to receive the experience I needed to get where I am today. (Dr. Chemist, 157)

Dr. Teacher credited the program for developing his awareness about higher education opportunities. The program's influence helped him to refine and complete the degree.

I hold a lot of things personal, because I do get involved with things like that. And one summer I did McNair and took research theory. I also credit the program's support to enter programs such as the National Science Foundation in Washington. I loved it. I learned so much and working with the program that got me support and confidence to present in many conferences around the nation. I really loved that. It opened my eyes that I could do it. (Dr. Teacher, 27)

Dr. Teacher recalled a variety of experiences that ranged from program course work and internships to conferences that helped him to develop and transformed him to focus his energies on the doctoral journey.

Flaca reiterated the program's support: "When looking back, I don't think I had the support in my doctorate program that we had in the McNair program in my undergraduate years" (59).

Participants who demonstrated success in the undergraduate experiences may not have always been certain about graduate education. Flaca experienced a period of uncertainty.

I got the research piece and I was always in the lab and going to all the seminars with the program. I knew I loved science but even as a senior in college, I really just didn't know what was next. I applied for the doctorate program after we visited the university in one of our program trips. (Flaca, 60)

The academic support programs are important for first-generation Hispanic students. As stated by Anton, the program helped him to clarify his career goals.

Initially, I was with Dr. Garza in the kinesiology department and working with a study on BMI and weight. Due to being in the program, I got to see all the research presentations and realized that I wanted to learn more about a science lab at the university. The program sent me over to the lab and it was a dramatic change in my life. (Anton, 118)

Anton indicated that participating in the program showed him that his career options had expanded and his outcome was as a direct result of the support program.

The academic support programs were not limited to the McNair Scholars Program during the participants' undergraduate education. Several of the participants also took part in a transition program that took them from their senior year in high school to their first year in college. Three participants stated that, without this critical transition support, it was highly unlikely that they would have gone to college right away.

Flaca explained that the College Assistance Migrant program (CAMP) was a critical first-year assistance to her because of the free room and board, textbooks, and the monthly stipend.

I was a migrant worker since I was 12 until I graduated from high school. So some of the scholarships that I got was through some of those migrant programs that they used to have. (Flaca, 58)

Flaca explained that her transition might not have occurred even with all the honors courses she took in high school because she did not know how to make the transition. No one in her family had ever gone to college. Laura also participated in a summer College Exploration Program (CEP) that provided all the same services that Flaca received.

The College Exploration Program helped me accomplish my goals. I started my freshman year in college through the College Integration Program and it helped me. I actually had classes that I needed tutoring, so that I needed to be successful from the start and the program was so helpful. (Laura, 167)

The program helped the participants to develop relationships with core faculty who were sources of encouragement and academic advice. Dr. Teacher continued his graduate work at the same institution where he received his undergraduate degree.

I didn't feel like I was the best anymore, the way it was in psychology, I didn't know everything. So I felt lost, I went to the program to see about a tutor and heard about the scholars program. I remember the program helped me understand things like my IRB and the abstract. (Dr. Teacher, 21)

Dr. Teacher explained how he met Dr. Jones while working with the academic support program at the university. Later in his doctoral program, he sought out Dr. Jones

as his advisor for his master's thesis. The program assisted him in navigating the path for the ultimate educational outcomes, such as attainment of his doctoral degree. Dr. Teacher appreciated Dr. Jones's advice and his ability to discuss and share his knowledge about the world of doctoral education.

### **Theme 2: Personal Attributes**

Personal attributes for the participants in this study were manifested in various ways and at various times throughout their educational journeys. Each one had to have a high level of commitment to education. With an internal need to fulfill their educational aspirations, the participants navigated the educational system to obtain a doctoral degree. The characteristics that one possesses can develop, given the proper attention and resources.

Personal attributes were evident in all of the participants in this study. The level of motivation that starts from within is often labeled as *intrinsic motivation*. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself (Deci, 1975); thus, the term refers to an inherent enjoyment of one's tasks or work. The long journey to doctoral attainment necessitates enjoying learning and the characteristics to apply that learning to achieve a doctoral degree.

#### **Being Self-Motivated**

From the ninth grade I started getting into the honors classes and then there was no turning back. Initially when I came here, I felt so terrible. I was put back two grades because I could not speak English. Then I felt special when I learned English worked hard and got promoted. (Flaca, 30)

This statement by Flaca indicated that, regardless of the circumstances, she was motivated to get good grades. Moving to the United States from Mexico, Flaca was working at a disadvantage due to the language barrier but she was determined to work through the language and engage in academics. Flaca stated that she felt inadequate because she was talented in mathematics and science, so being demoted made her feel

that she was “dumb.” In reality, her talent in academics was evident once she learned English. Flaca attributed her ability to apply herself and get into the honors courses to the strong work ethic instilled by her parents. She noted that the challenge was to learn the language, manage her classes, and excel. Her motivation paid off and the outcome made her “special.” Flaca explained that, when she expressed “I felt special,” she utilized this feeling to sustain her during other frustrating times on her educational journey. Her motivation and resiliency was evident in the following quote: “In high school I applied to as many scholarships as I could. I was going to college!” (Flaca, 65).

Another prime example of this subtheme is Elena and her description of her grades prior to college. She maintained intensity about her grades when it came to her studies when she was younger,

I always wanted to make good grades, and I’m not sure where I got that from, to be honest with you. It was just something that was in me. So, my grades were extremely important to me. (Elena, 90)

The motivation and desire to do well were evident in participants’ statements. Dr. Chemist sought opportunities to get extra academic assistance for her educational endeavors.

I actually stayed and attended extra classes, like a teacher who is going to be holding extra study sessions. I would stay at school to attend. (Dr. Chemist, 144)

Dr. Chemist described her early investment in education and the overall attributes she maintained in her precollege educational experience.

Laura expressed her passion for science and love of science competitions in junior high school.

I was always worried that I was not going to do well in the science fairs. I always made sure I got examples from the teachers. I would work hard to get the things done. I needed to do well. . . . I made sure I had the poster board, markers, and construction paper early. (Laura, 172)

Laura elaborated by adding that she worried about materials because her parents were poor and she would make sure she had the proper materials needed to conduct her science project. At times, she got materials from friends. Laura laughed as she recalled one specific situation.

It was two days before the science fair and I won first place the year before and my dad did not get it. I needed some markers and some paper. I knew we didn't have money, so I went to the teacher and asked her for some markers and paper. Too bad, she didn't have any. So I asked my girlfriend and she shared her stuff with me. (Laura, 153)

Laura's determination in seeking assistance from others was bold and an indication that these personal characteristics and attributes should be nurtured early in a student's life to change an already dismal status for first-generation Hispanics students.

A good example of extraordinary amounts of determination and motivation was offered by Dr. Chemist when she described how she dealt with her high school's lack of rigor in academics.

I could have taken what was offered at my high school, but I knew if I wanted to go into science, I would need to do the extra classes and read a lot of extra books in the library. (Dr. Chemist, 147)

Flaca made a similar statement reiterating her commitment, "I took all the honors classes and pushed myself on my own to always do more" (Flaca, 97).

All six participants expressed their feelings about school. For example, Dr. Teacher said, "I loved it. And I was one of the top students in my high school" (Dr. Teacher, 3). His love of school would later influence his career path after his doctoral degree. Dr. Teacher is currently working at a junior high school with persistently low performance ratings and his school is in a low-income area. He utilized his own educational path to stimulate and bring to life the love of learning from his students. Dr. Teacher reminds his students of where he came from and he tries to motivate them each day. Dr. Teacher recalled these comments that he made to a young male student in the

hallway just a few days before our first meeting: “You can be whatever you want. Look at me, I didn’t have anything and you need to remember you can be whatever you want in life. Just keep coming to school!”

All participants indicated a desire to pursue graduate studies. The desire was a critical attribute for them as they navigated their journey. Anton knew early in his undergraduate years and while still struggling with his GPA that he wanted a terminal degree.

I was working with another faculty member and I knew I wanted to be a doctor. At that time I was not even sure how many years it took or even what type of doctor but I knew I was going to continue to keep moving forward. (Anton, 103)

Similarly, Dr. Teacher shared,

I wanted to go for a doctoral degree but just didn’t know how to get there and even thought about it all the time. I was curious and scared but still wanted it always. (Dr. Teacher, 15)

A similar curiosity and yearning for more from education was expressed by Dr. Chemist: “I knew that I wanted to be a scientist early on and I considered my goals and enjoyed science from early on in life.” This was also evident in Laura’s interview as she recalled her experience in high school. Laura spoke excitedly: “I was very ambitious and I wanted to always get the top grades” (Laura, 162).

Being self-motivated prompted the participants on their academic journey to the doctoral degree. Learning about their journey enabled me to learn more about myself and my personal journey.

### **Being Resilient**

The literature identifies being resilient as one of the reasons Latino students are successful in the educational system (Lerma, 2010). A resilient person has the ability to overcome obstacles (Chavkin, Gonzalez, & Rader, 2000). Resilience is a dynamic process in which individuals exhibit positive behavior adaption in times of significant



diversity, stress, trauma or tragedy (Lerma, 2010). Many times Hispanic children are faced with issues like the one Flaca shared below.

When I came here, I was bullied as a kid and I couldn't speak English. So my first year was hard, but I was going to learn English and get where I needed to be in school. I remember that the girls would pull my hair and call me "wetback" and when I cried I would go hide in the room where they kept the coats. (Flaca, 39)

Flaca focused on learning the language and her resilience to bullying was evident in her statement above. She simply wanted to start her educational journey. Flaca had other struggles to overcome early in her childhood, as her entire family migrated to several states in the northern region of the United States.

Migrating was hard. We went to several different states and the hours were long. I remember thinking, "If I can do this, I can stay in school." (Flaca, 42)

Flaca's and Laura's early years as children of migrant workers led to a transient life. The families' travel out of the state and often the disruptive lifestyle was counterproductive to maintaining an effective academic journey. Resiliency demonstrated by the participants was key for them to overcome obstacles that otherwise could have taken over control of their journey.

Another example of resilience can be seen in Dr. Teacher's case, growing up as a "sickly kid" due to his hospital visits (as often as 19 times in one year).

My parents were real supportive throughout my life. We were real poor and we struggled a lot growing up. I was a sickly kid and this was hard for my parents. I remember them talking about how were they going to pay. (Dr. Teacher, 9)

Dr. Teacher displayed impressive resilience in his younger years. This statement indicates that his parents were a factor in his resiliency: "We need to always do something to better ourselves and one of the ways to do that was to go to college, I mean, to do well" (Dr. Teacher, 2).

Dr. Chemist offered the following statement that supports the notion that resiliency instilled by parents was evident: “I always had to come home and first thing do my homework” (Dr. Chemist, 142).

As was the case with Anton, he sailed by in high school, as he explained it, but when he got to the university, he was shocked. After his first semester, Anton had a GPA of 1.0 (out of 4.0) and he could not believe that his grades were that bad. He said that he remembered thinking, “Wow, this school is like down the street from where I live and it is a whole different world!” (Anton, 94).

The day Anton learned about his GPA was the day he applied resilience to get his degree. Anton focused on his courses and diligently pushed himself until he got his GPA high enough to apply for the scholars program at the university. Prior to this day, Anton had “gone with the flow” on his studying and grades. Anton took 2 years to get his GPA over 3.0. He recalled telling the McNair program staff that his transcript was a story about a guy who came to the university with one goal and wanted to be in the scholars program to eventually get a doctorate.

Elena is an example of what resilience means and how a person can be successful regardless of home life. Coming from a verbally abusive home was not easy but Elena was able to put forward energy toward her educational endeavors.

My life growing up was very tough. We lived in a poor neighborhood, we were not rich. I kind of lived in an abusive environment. I’m not saying we were abused, but my father was very abusive to my mother. That’s because they got married very young. (Elena, 87)

From these early experiences, Elena found solace in her educational world. She spent numerous hours at school in her early years and numerous hours in the lab. Long lab hours were also an indication of Elena’s constant resiliency throughout her life.

I worked 14 hour days in the lab once I got into my doctoral program. I had two young children and the hours were excessive but it was what I needed to do to

please the faculty at the lab and to get my research conducted for my study.  
(Elena, 89)

Flaca said that the support that she received during her doctoral program was critical because she went through a bout of depression after she had her daughter. Her natural approach was to see the Dean and explain that she was struggling. Flaca was surprised when the Dean told her “Okay, make a choice, you can finish or you can just drop out and go work” (Flaca, 101). Flaca knew that she was not struggling with the academic world but she was going through a period in her personal life that was going to require her complete attention. Her resiliency helped her during this phase of her journey. She went back and spoke to her lab partner, who told her that they would work through her struggle because the lab needed her. Flaca’s skills in the lab were above the others.

The literature suggests that “children are able to manipulate and shape their environment to deal with its pressures successfully and to comply with its demands” (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992, p. 103). The lived experiences of their parents, as alluded to by the participants, point to the types of circumstances that defined the realities that the participants faced. Within these realities, the participants had to develop a critical perspective on the meaning of their lives and on the types of opportunities available to them.

### **Being Goal Oriented**

I thought to myself, “Why am I doing this? My friends are going out having fun and I am in the lab.” But, nothing was more important than [education]. I had these goals and nothing was getting in the way. (Laura, 161)

Even the most motivated person has to know how to set goals. The same could be true for the participants of this study. The attainment of a doctoral degree requires numerous years of dedication and definitely short- and long-term goals. In each participant’s story/narrative, having clear goals was evident, starting in the early years in

education and throughout the doctoral journey. Perseverance was essential to help the participant to strive for a benchmark, rather than just set goals; the participants had to negotiate their lives in a manner to accomplish their goals. On several occasions, the participants had to hold for a while or reconfigure to fit life.

For example, Dr. Teacher put his goal of pursuing a doctorate degree on hold.

I knew I wanted to be in education. My first year was very intense, I had to step back for a while, and I taught during the year to make sure I eventually went back and finished the doctorate. (Dr. Teacher, 10)

Dr. Teacher laid out his plan in his first year of graduate school. Since he did not have a teaching degree, originally he had to make sure that he obtained necessary certifications. He needed to ensure that he made a full circle back to his goal of a doctoral degree. His love of teaching was evident in the extra time that he invested in his ultimate goal.

I guess that 2 years later, that's when I changed. I got my teacher's certificate and I got my mid-management certificate also. I had the certificates when I started my research again. It was overwhelming but I knew this was the way to go. (Dr. Teacher, 19)

Dr. Chemist described her thought process in setting goals during her interview.

Her goals were especially deliberate once she arrived at the university: she set short- and long-term goals.

If I'm going to do a project, I think what my timeline is going to be like and I put that timeline as my goal. So it was kind of like that with my classes, I knew I have to get prelim done, I knew I had to do a seminar. So, on a certain day, I knew I had to get some of my goals met on that day and some goals on another day. I knew I wanted to defend and finish up no longer than 5 years and I did. (Dr. Chemist, 149)

Elena always had a passion for learning. Her childhood school years were a good experience for her when she was at school and she remembered being determined to do well in school. Elena also used school as a refuge from her home life, which she stated was a constant source of "weekend fights and drinking." Elena's orientation toward her long-term goals was not always so clear but she firmly believed that her talks with her

grandmother (*abuela*) helped; they talked about her dreams of becoming educated so she could help her with money and not just with chores. Ironically, Elena was also helping her mother by giving her the entire weekly paycheck from her part-time job at the local burger stand, keeping only \$20 a week for herself.

Elena explained that her early goals were important because she worked, went to school, and helped her grandmother with household chores. She remembered being excited about graduating from high school as valedictorian, which she had worked hard to accomplish. Her accomplishment was part of a short-term goal as she set her long-term goal of pursuing a doctorate. Elena never really laid out a specific plan for her future, but she always knew that everything she did was getting her closer to higher education.

I was always very goal oriented and could be aggressive at times when it came to school. I was sidetracked in my first year of college. I was still focusing on the long-term goal of getting the degree. Once I got it, I wanted to keep going and of course the doctorate degree was part of that goal. (Elena, 105)

Dr. Chemist knew early on that education was important. Nothing would keep her from it. Her early love of science was encouraged and nurtured by her father, although he had not graduated from high school. Higher education was part of her goals and she knew that it meant for her to keep going to school to get a doctorate within a time frame. She is now 31 years old and a Senior Chemist with a major company in the northern United States. She described her journey as a chemical reaction, which she illustrated in her picture selected for this study. Her goals are characterized as a series of hills to climb (goals with time frames) and valleys (times of struggle and frustration), as well as periods of focus and accomplishing short-term goals.

This is akin to a climb up and down a hill with many smaller hills on both paths. Because of some choices, the uphill journey was stressful and difficult. . . . You reach the peak of the reaction and then it is the highest peak and longest downhill journey. (Dr. Chemist, 147)

Dr. Chemist's family was the strength behind her, and she received encouragement from her father, especially.

I always had support from my family. They were my support system. I think they understood what I was kind of going through because even when they got divorced, I realized that individually they supported me. But my perspective was to stay with my goals, and it helped that they were further away during my doctorate. (Dr. Chemist, 132)

Initially, Flaca's goal for high school was to speak English and counteract her demotion of two grades when she came to the United States from Mexico with her parents. Therefore, she learned English and was promoted to the seventh grade, which was the start of her educational goals. Her father stressed the importance of education and being in the United States because they would have more opportunities. As stated earlier, Flaca worked in the fields with her family. She spent summers and the beginning of each school year laboring in the fields. While other students played in the summer, Flaca worked all summer. Flaca's goals included education because she knew early on that education would get her out of the fields.

I think people don't want to put forth the work it takes. I spent many hours in the lab. The work is not for everyone. You really have to love research and do this for yourself. I know part of my goal was to have more for my family, everything I didn't have. (Flaca, 43)

Laura arrived at the university very goal driven. She recalled that, after her first semester of college, a faculty member asked her to work for him. Laura agreed and found herself in a research lab in her second semester in college.

The other lab workers treated me like I didn't belong and left me out of the process and techniques in the lab. I always stayed late and they saw my commitment after a while. (Laura, 160)

Laura set goals during the first week of college, leading to her rapid undergraduate completion (in less than 4 years) at age 21. She set new goals and a new journey to the doctorate.

Dr. Teacher's goal was to be the top student in high school. He achieved this and made his parents very proud. His goals stalled when he left the major university where he had enrolled upon high school graduation. Dr. Teacher felt very alone at the large university. He questioned his goals and wanted to leave the university. In his frustration, he contacted his mother and told her that he was coming home; however, he had already decided to attend a university much closer to home to continue with his undergraduate goal.

I remember getting a lot of support for my goals at the university from faculty. A professor once handed me back an assignment and told me I had Ph.D. potential. (Dr. Teacher, 15)

According to Dr. Teacher, the above statement had a profound effect on him. What this professor did not know was that Dr. Teacher had questioned himself many times along his journey, initially in his undergraduate years, so much so during his graduate years that he took a break midway in his doctoral program. This statement resonated with Dr. Teacher and he initiated short-term goals to get back to school and finish his doctorate. He explained that he had thought about this statement even a year later. Once back in the doctoral program, he assessed his goals when an assignment caused him to doubt his skills again to continue in the program,

I remember being the youngest person in the class; everyone was an administrator at a school. It was all very intimidating for me. I moved past the doubt and did what I could. It was good. I came back to school and finished the doctorate because that was always in the back of my mind. It was always my goal. (Dr. Teacher, 14)

Once Dr. Teacher came back to the doctoral program, he found supportive new faculty mentors. He found faculty mentors with whom he could have conversations about his goals and his interests in teaching in the school system. "No one in my family has a degree, much less a doctorate. The situation is sad because I have a large extended family. I'm not sure why this is the case."

Because of the limited financial resources available to all participants, connecting with those social networks that assist low-income families with the college readiness and acceptance process was challenging. Each of the participants connected to these social networks via their high level of engagement in their high school years and connecting with support programs.

Many educational opportunities are directly linked to academic resources. When a population is not aware of the resources available from society, it is imperative that the educational system expand support programs below the college level to educate students about the opportunities that are available prior to high school and college admission.

### **Theme 3: Identity Struggles**

According to Erikson (1968), personal and social identity formation occurs through effective and meaningful interactions relating to community and significant role interchange. The impact of these interactions carries forward into adulthood. The implications related to identity and the experiences of the participants in this study were connected to their socialization process in their personal and academic worlds as they navigated their doctoral journeys. According to Stanley (2006), people have described living in “two worlds.” The Hispanic participants in this study offered examples of early identity associated with family, school, and community, illuminating their identity formation as adults and the struggles to maintain the Hispanic/Latino culture while living in a culture of academia.

#### **Cultural Identity**

You don't really think about culture until you leave home. It is important to know where you are to know where you want to go. I have to make sure I come back and help others and make my region better. I think people forget where they come from. (Anton, 156)

Cultural identity among Hispanics has been at the forefront of many educational discussions due to the lack of educational attainment by this group (Fry, 2009). Many



times the perception of Hispanic academic ability is already present in the educational system, as reflected in Flaca's experience when her family migrated to the United States. She was demoted two grades due to her language barrier and later promoted a grade once she had mastered the language barrier.

Because I had a thick Mexican accent, no one bothered to try and see if I was smart. I was labeled a dummy. At the time, we all only spoke Spanish and it was a difficult time to love my culture and see how it affected my dreams. (Flaca, 57)

It appears that some teachers base their initial ratings of a student, in part, on the student's ethnicity and language. Laura felt bad when she tried to work hard and learn English despite her sisters' ridicule about her trying to be "White." She talked to herself to make sure that she could say phrases correctly and use them at school to master the English language.

Laura went to a private university in Texas. Upon arriving, it was clear that some people wanted to isolate the poor uneducated Hispanic and doubted whether they really belonged in academia. Being part of a cohesive family often translates into Latino families of first generation taking on leadership roles that require a certain degree of maturity to ensure the well-being of the family. In the early life of Elena, she went to live with her grandmother and assumed many adult responsibilities, such as mowing the grass, cleaning the house, and helping her grandmother run the household.

I was happy because my grandmother lived in a neighborhood where my aunt lived. I would help her mow the grass, clean the house, and pay the bills. I didn't mind. (Elena, 106)

Loyalty to the Hispanic culture often caused participants to feel guilty that they could not help the family. Elena struggled with assuming the caretaker role for the family. She stated that her parents supported her but, after she moved to live with her grandmother, she saw her grandmother as the central support. Elena believed in the Hispanic culture: "You take care of your family, even if you are only in junior high."

While Dr. Chemist was in her doctoral program, her visits home became less frequent due to the stress of the program and the strain from her family when she visited. She recalled this time:

I would tell my family that I had to work in the lab or had to complete some work for my class to avoid having to explain what I was doing or why I hadn't graduated yet. This was because, for a scientist, I finished fast. It was better to stay and have the holidays with friends. (Dr. Chemist, 129)

The typical messages that the Hispanic culture sends to females are to stay home and get married. Dr. Chemist felt the pressure to be the person that she was expected by her family to be and the person that she was becoming because of her education. Traveling home and having to shift her identity during her doctoral journey was difficult.

I was brought up to be "humble" and the world I lived in was competitive. My faculty tried to ingrain this into our heads while I was in my doctoral program. This made it hard to try and deal with family, though they are the ones that supported me throughout. It was hard, very hard. (Dr. Chemist, 133)

The culture of academia involved self-promotion, which contradicted her family's messages when she growing up. In the Latino culture, humility and service to others are communicated as part of the cultural identity.

Flaca's father was extremely supportive of her education but, once she entered graduate school, her father's cultural beliefs of *machismo* dominated his indirect messages. This caused conflict with Flaca, who wanted to be successful but wanted to be a good daughter. Her desire for higher education conflicted with her cultural message, which was to get married and support the family.

It is natural to think about identity and how one wants to carve out an identity in one's culture. Ethnic identity is the degree of and type of association with one's ethnic group. It can also be defined as the portion of one's social identity that is derived from connection to one's ethnic group and the significance that one attaches to that membership (Phinney, 1992). A distinction must be made between the content and the

development of ethnic identity. Content includes attitudes toward the group and the practice of ethnic behaviors. This was evident in Anton's statement:

I am a proud Latino male. I identify as being Tex-Mex or South Texan. I am proud of this because of the region. Nobody knows what it is to be from this area unless you are from here. The food, culture, language (a mix of Mexican Spanish that is incorrect but we understand it). (Anton, 255)

Anton defined how he understands his culture. The way in which people come to understand the implications of their ethnicity and its role in their lives is focused on processes (Phinney, 1992). For example, Dr. Teacher now lives in the same town with his parents and grandparents. He explained the elaborate Christmas Hispanic traditions.

In Christmas, we actually take part in the town's celebration. Each year the church has our family prepare the "luminaries" for Christmas. We have a great big celebration and we make them with brown paper bags, filled with sand, and then a candle in the middle. It is an awesome tradition that I have passed on to my daughter. (Dr. Teacher, 22)

The participants in this study had various viewpoints on how ethnic identity was part of their journey. Some stated that it was a large part of their journey. The following quotes are from participants who had left their communities upon graduation for a major university in Texas, only to return abruptly due to not feeling comfortable in the new environment. Their limited knowledge on how to navigate outside their cultural identity was a contributor to their return to their "native" environment. As Dr. Teacher said, "I think it was fear; I don't know why" (Dr. Teacher, 22). Dr. Teacher, at various points on his journey, struggled with his intellectual choices about getting the education that he desired. Similarly, Elena was in the midst of navigating her world of higher education but returned home to keep her world intact: "When I left the university, at that point I didn't think I was going back to school. The whole thing was very uncomfortable" (Elena, 73).

Anton best exhibited this notion by his example of searching for a doctoral program immediately after graduation.

I started looking and it was stressful. But I had to make sure I got an offer to help me and my new wife move out of the state. It was important to get the best offer. In regards to family, it was hard—you know, the “Latino” thing. They would get emotional and lots of tears. It was hard but we had to leave. (Anton, 14)

Anton expressed that his background was directly related to the high emotional state and reactions of his family in his doctoral journey. While Anton appeared to dismiss the family by referring to the “Latino” thing, he stressed his appreciation for his family, who he loves to talk to but could not handle the emotions when he was in the middle of his doctoral program.

While Dr. Chemist might not have felt the impact of ethnic identity and claimed that it had nothing to do with her journey, she indicated that her early life was very different from traditional Hispanic culture. For example, her father taking her to school on a motorcycle was out of the norm of Hispanic identity. In fact, it was not in the Hispanic cultural norm for a father to take his daughter to school every day. Later, Dr. Chemist revealed that her aspirations were a conflict with her mother’s wish for her to come back home and be close to the family.

One particular interesting point made by Laura was that her family held strong beliefs that, as Hispanics, when school conflicted with family, family always came first.

Anton shared the following in reference to culture within his family:

For example, our culture, I know was Hispanic for me. Men ate first at family gatherings. *Machismo* was always present. We acknowledged all family members as being family, even if they were third or fourth cousins. Being from Texas, Tejano music was always playing or heard at least once a day throughout my life. I went to many *quinceaneras* [15-year birthday celebration] and we have chili with everything. I mean the spicy kind, it is all over. I still use a lot of chili today. (Anton, 113)

Elena commented that her cultural identity was specific to a region in south Texas. She provided an explanation to illustrate the use of language in the region, referred to as “Tex-Mex language.” Elena compared her views on the cultural identity that she formed early on to the identity of the present.

There are ways in which we can speak both Spanish and English in the same conversation. That identifies us to this area. I have heard many others from South America, like from Venezuela, who feel this is a beautiful thing, unique to our Hispanic/Latino upbringing. (Elena, 84)

This view came from being raised in both cultures and trying to speak and retain both languages. The attainment of the doctoral degree by all participants in this study required various types of associations that helped their families to understand their chosen educational path and the culture that they loved. For example, in the case of Laura, Flaca, and Elena, their families' first language was Spanish. They received college credit for their Spanish courses prior to entering the university because this was what they spoke at home. With a cluster of friends, they would engage in their "Tex-Mex language," a combination of Spanish and English blended so seamlessly that only someone who did not understand Spanish would catch a few English words now and then.

### **Cultural Conflicts**

Family was sometimes the source of negative impact on the participants' transitions, mostly in a clash of between parents' expectations for the participants' educational pursuits and the parents' own needs. Flaca's explanation was particularly illuminating.

My family are migrants. Working in the fields, picking crops, and long hard days of working outdoors is valued. But when I explain I'm not going to do that, they think I'm not going to have a real job or they think I am being unappreciative. My grandparents are also supportive but my grandmother wants to know why I don't live close to them. As a girl in the family, she thinks I need to be close to take care of my mom and dad when they need me. (Flaca, 31)

Flaca's statement is reminiscent of several expressions and statements made by other participants in this study. The families appeared to believe that being geographically close was very important. Also, issues of traditional gender roles came up in several interviews, even though family was always cited as being very supportive.

My dad was very supportive and so was my mother but when I got into my doctoral program he was worried about me in a protective manner because I was his daughter. (Flaca, 16)

Furthermore, cultural norms could be a source of conflict. Elena articulated the traditional Hispanic gender roles and expectations.

Growing up, when my grandmother had to have someone come live with her, it was expected that I go live with her because I was the only girl in my family. I didn't mind because it got me out of my family's house. (Elena, 83)

Elena's willingness to give her mother her work wages was a direct reflection on Elena not wanting to live the life that her mother had endured, but somehow the paycheck eased her mind. Elena's support of her mother even after she went to live with her grandmother is a clear indication of the expectation that she felt from her mother.

As the educational journey became more complex and demanding, the participants felt pressure to be around family during holidays and breaks. Dr. Chemist stated that it was too much work to go home, although she perceived her family as her foundation.

I would tell my family that I had to work in the lab or had to complete some work for my class to avoid having to explain what I was doing or why I hadn't graduated yet. This was because, for a scientist, I finished fast. It was better to stay and have the holidays with friends. (Dr. Chemist, 129)

On Elena's doctoral journey, her grandmother was a constant support throughout the turbulent years of her doctoral program. Elena went to live with her grandmother after the sixth grade.

When I lived with my grandmother, she was so supportive. I was working at the local burger place and I felt I had to give my entire check to my mother. She would pick me up on Friday and I would go cash my check, hand it over to her, and just keep a small amount. I should have given this money to my grandmother. (Elena, 82)

Elena's reflection about the support that she received from her grandmother at this point in her life was also intertwined with her resentment that her mother was taking her paycheck each week. Culturally, Elena had to give her mother the money because it

was expected for her to support the family, even though she was no longer living with her grandmother. She also cleaned her grandmother's house, mowed the lawn, and washed clothes. Consequently, Elena was involved in major housework when she was in the seventh grade. The families appeared to believe that being geographically close was very important. This type of expectation was in contrast to gaining an education. The issue of traditional gender roles emerged in several of the interviews, although family was always cited as being very supportive.

Another example was Flaca and her high school boyfriend whom she married prior to leaving for her doctoral program.

My dad was very supportive and so was my mother. He was also very protective. Right after I graduated from college, I was accepted into the doctoral program. He asked me if Arturo was going with me. We got married at the courthouse. How crazy! I think we rushed to please my family. Arturo and I knew we would get married eventually. To keep peace with my father, we had a quick wedding. (Flaca, 15)

Flaca's father held the *machismo* attitude that males should be dominant and he wanted to ensure that his daughter went to college with a male. Flaca was not forced to marry but she negotiated the struggles of her family letting go and thought that, if getting married would help her family to feel comfortable, then she would go ahead. However this sounds like something out of the mid-1900, it still occurs in modern society, as shared by the participants in this study.

Although Dr. Chemist's family had little knowledge about higher education, she consulted with them about her choices and often received feedback as follows.

I talked to my mom and grandparents, and they were quiet all the time. Then they would hug me and tell me, "That's fine." Even though they said it was fine, like a traditional Hispanic family, they didn't want to change and it was different and difficult to embrace who I was. In their eyes, I was still the little girl that liked science, not the scientist. (Dr. Chemist, 156)

Dr. Chemist felt guilty about leaving her family behind so she shared with them all the aspects of higher education. As a result, she often did not make the trip home to visit her family. Today, this still is a struggle for her now because she lives out of state.

#### **Theme 4: Socialization Struggles**

Social class is often a predominant filter that influences how individuals view and experience various situations. All participants in the study were low income and first-generation students. Technically defined for this study, they were at 150% of the poverty level as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011). All six participants spoke about their upbringing and illustrated, through shared personal stories, many challenges that their families had faced due to limited financial resources and being the first generation to complete a college degree. Because of the limited financial resources available to all participants, connecting with social networks associated with the college readiness and acceptance process was often challenging. This section discusses the socialization struggles encompassing the first-generation student and low-income characteristics that are routinely found in the participants. The road to a university for poor students is often paved with obstacles and thus difficult to navigate. When families do not have resources, the options become very limited with regard to access, opportunity, and support.

##### **Struggling to “Fit In”**

I wanted to quit (college). I was very overwhelmed and wanted to just go home. I felt like I didn’t fit in. (Dr. Teacher, 5)

Dr. Teacher, Flaca, and Elena described their early higher educational experiences as overwhelming. All three attended a very large urban university upon graduation from high school and were overwhelmed. All three left the university, retreated home, and enrolled in a local university. Elena stated that, although she was valedictorian of her rural high school class, she did not know how to lead a university



life; as a result, her college path temporarily ended after one semester. Elena had gone to a major university because she was told that her ranking in the class gave her automatic acceptance to any university in Texas. “I felt like everyone ignored me or I was invisible. I was confused and lonely” (Elena, 96).

Similarly, Dr. Teacher, who attended the same large university, wanted to come home after a year. He was lonely and his feelings escalated to panic, with an urge to get out of town and go home. He called his mother and announced that he was heading home. His mother sensed his panic and asked him what was wrong. He felt a weight lifted from his shoulders when he told his parents that he wanted to “quit.” He went home for a week and then went back to take final exams. Later, he transferred to a university 30 miles from his parents. Although his path was motivated by his attributes at each juncture, Dr. Teacher encountered fear. This fear could be attributed to an introduction to a new and different world of higher education. Dr. Teacher currently lives in his community after navigating the path to the doctorate.

Laura’s involvement in the McNair scholars program for 2 years exposed her to research experiences that included presenting her research with a faculty member at a conference in another state and exposure to graduate schools. She credited her confidence to participation in that program. She explained how she utilized her experiences from the program to “fit in” her doctoral cohort. Laura attended an orientation and one of the group sessions asked students to share their last vacation or family excursion. Laura had never gone on vacation but she used a research presentation trip with her faculty mentor as a suitable substitution. She described the hotel where they stayed in Puerto Rico and how they toured the rain forest in a jeep. As she recited the details of her “vacation,” she almost felt that the trip was a vacation. During the interview, Laura moved her arms up in the air as she described the forest and the

waterfalls; she was animated. We both laughed and then just looked at each other. Laura commented that it was odd that orientation would be something she remembered instead of all of the courses or the warning from the administration that several students would not be in the program a year later.

I always felt uncomfortable and knew that, once I was done with the year, I would move closer to home. The campus was full of people I had nothing in common with. We [Hispanics] were like a small group that really did not belong. At least that is how I felt. (Flaca, 35)

Both Dr. Teacher and Flaca explained that their families were always supportive and did not answer questions. They did not question why they came home; instead, the families were glad to have them home. In contrast, Elena described her grandmother's reaction to her quitting college.

My grandmother was wise and she told me in her "Tex-Mex" Spanish that I needed to be strong and, if I came home, I needed to go back and work at the local hamburger joint. I think this was her way of supporting me because she hugged me when I cried. But also to make me realize I did not want to work and flip burgers. (Elena, 73)

These participants had dealt with many struggles as they prepared for their journey as a graduate student. Coming from poor working-class backgrounds, the students were told by their families that, if they worked hard, they would be successful. Yet often unknown to the student or parent was the possibility of an implicit culture at each higher educational institution. This hidden culture holds the key to channels of communication, accessing information, and benefiting from multiple levels of support with each department and the university administration. This culture is also guided by middle-class, White, male-dominated values that challenge working-class students, like the ones in this study, to fit in and get the information that they need to be successful.

Laura was enthusiastic as she took part in the first year of her doctoral program. Her feelings about the beginning of her first year in her doctoral program were excitement and nervousness.

Those feelings turned into isolation and not feeling good enough, all just from a simple orientation mixer. So what if we never went to a vacation? We were poor! (Laura, 146)

Dr. Teacher shared the anxiety that he had felt as he sat in his doctoral class with older and experienced administrators.

I felt sick to my stomach, not sure why, but I just had to get out of there. Everyone was older and looked different from me. I knew how to interact with everyone but my point of reference was just so different. (Dr. Teacher, 14)

This was the same feeling that Dr. Teacher had experienced in his first year at the large university in his undergraduate education.

During Elena's interview she admitted to being an "aggressive girl in junior high and having to be tough, because if you weren't you would get beat-up" (Elena, 101). She reflected on her years with her grandmother and the advice to get an education and not rely on a man. In addition, her grandmother offered her comfort when Elena flunked out of the major university. "My grandmother told me to go down the street to see if the college would take me" (Elena, 102). Despite the difficult work to obtain a doctorate, Elena refused to let barriers, insecurities, and her encounters with traditional gender bias in the Hispanic culture interfere with her ultimate goal. Even though at times she felt that she as giving in to the prescribed cultural stereotyping early in her life, Elena knew that her pursuit of the doctorate would eliminate some of the problems in her family. The sad outcome is that Elena is still the only person in her family to have a degree. She tries to advocate the importance of education but she is often viewed by her family as a "know-it-all."

### **Feeling Inferior**

"These Mexicans always get everything free." I was so intimidated! Can you believe someone would say this? (Flaca, 36)

In Flaca's instance, her feeling inferior was attributed to others' opinions and harsh verbal comments. The participants lacked social and cultural capital to navigate

their college experience. Although highly motivated with high expectations, they often felt inferior due to their poverty status and comments that contributed to their feelings.

Flaca had support in her high school years from a counselor who told her about a migrant scholarship to a private school. Once Flaca was at the university, her initial educational experience was negative and devastating, which stayed with her long after the incident. She recalled in her interview how verbal comments can be hurtful and painful with lasting effects. Once she had made the exciting trip to her private college, she overheard ladies in library saying, “I hate it when those poor Mexicans get free books” (Flaca, 42). In tears, Flaca explained that she was hurt and wanted to quit but could not because she was not going to be a failure. The plight of poverty is far reaching and was carried by each participant as a badge of shame.

In some cases, participants described their families’ ability to meet their basic needs, but not much more. For example, Dr. Teacher discussed his family’s modest socioeconomic status.

We never had much. In fact, we didn’t have very much. We got by, and I could tell when it was close to payday—lots of potatoes and beans! But if we needed something, we would get it. We just kind of got by. (Dr. Teacher, 12)

The most telling example of a financially challenging context to grow up in was offered by Flaca. Her story indicated that her family was significantly challenged. Flaca recalled her childhood:

When I was little, we lived in Mexico in an area called La Carreta, like a small ranch. We didn’t have a car, so when someone was going into town, we would jump into the back of a truck and got to town that way. We never thought about this till later in life. We thought we were pretty well off because we had food, but we didn’t have the bathroom inside. It was in a room attached to the house and we had to step outside to use the bathroom. (Flaca, 61)

Other participants shared Flaca’s positive attitude toward life despite their family’s low socioeconomic status and limited finances. Elena lived in a bad neighborhood when she was growing up and many times being outside and playing was

a test of her fortitude. Poor neighborhoods or *barrio* were known as ethnic enclaves. Elena would run back home as her *barrio* was poor and mean. The girls in the street not only tried to beat her up; they also made fun of her because she would not pay attention to them.

I lived in a bad neighborhood. There were always fights and cops down the street. Many times the fights were at our house. Every weekend it was the typical thing—a barbeque and then the fights. (Elena, 119)

The worst type of socioeconomic pressure for both Laura and Flaca came from the status of being a migrant worker. Both of them traveled with the entire family to northern states, such as Colorado, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and sometimes California. Both families traveled in trucks with campers in the back. The families traveled together to earn more funds as a collective unit of labor. This profession, according to Flaca, routinely turned its back on child labor laws.

We would sleep all in a row and sometimes, if I had to go to the bathroom at night, I would just go outside because it was better than the bathrooms at the campsites. (Flaca, 48)

I would get back to school, of course after everyone else started. I was always embarrassed that I was behind and did not have all the new stuff like my friends. Sometimes the teachers were the ones who pointed it out. I was young, so what could I say? (Laura, 162)

Both Laura and Flaca explained that the canneries and field bosses often did not pay the family until the last days of work, so it was so important that the family finish the job. The more the family picked crops, the more the family made, so the family's overall salary was vital in the summer jobs during the migrating season.

The challenging circumstances that participants had to confront and overcome in their pursuit of education were compelling. With resiliency, the participants demonstrated the capacity to endure difficult times and complete the doctorate.

Flaca recalled her first year at her new private college: "We were only a small group and we were like sort of treated differently, like the poor people of the whole

university” (Flaca, 33). Although Flaca entered the university based on academic merit, it was obvious that the new college setting for Flaca was not quick to embrace her diversity and others who looked like her. Flaca and others like her had entered on migrant scholarships. This experience heightened Flaca’s lack of trust of people who did not look like her.

Revealed by the participants was that their socioeconomic status influenced their educational experiences and aspirations. Whether the experiences were negative or positive, each participant drew on the experiences when navigating the doctoral journey.

I think we sabotage our own journey. We hinder our own success. I was not real confident and felt like I was not good enough to get the degree. (Dr. Teacher, 27)

The participants struggled with an internalized inferior sense of self based on their low socioeconomic status, even with the support programs and demonstrated academic successes. Whether they had limited access to educational opportunities or the role that their lower social class status played on their journey, the participants incorporated education as a component of class mobility. The most interesting observation was made by Flaca:

My parents thought I was better off because I got the college degree and I could not understand their perception of me being in a different class, because I was still poor. I was only making \$8 an hour for 19 hours a week! I was pretty poor and now in debt with student loans. (Flaca, 40)

Evidently, the parents of study participants correlated education with money, as confirmed by Dr. Teacher:

My dad would ask me about my having a doctorate and he could not believe that I was working in the school district, because with my doctorate degree I could make a lot of money. I had to explain to him that I didn’t have that kind of doctorate. (Dr. Teacher, 21)

Elena acknowledged that it was difficult to grow up in a rough neighborhood, with parents who were always fighting and drinking. Elena had to be tough even though

she felt small and insignificant. Many times her cousins stepped in if someone wanted to attack her. She described the challenges that this environment presented:

When I was growing up, we were poor and I kind of grew up in a neighborhood that has tough families and kids. I now know that I was in an abusive environment. I'm not saying we were directly hit, but my father would beat on my mom. (Elena, 87)

Elena said that the primary reason her father beat her mother was that her mother worked hard and her father drank and did not work. Flaca said, "My parents didn't have any education themselves, so they didn't have very good jobs either" (Flaca, 31).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented four major themes that emerged from the constant comparative analysis of the interview data: support systems, personal attributes, identity struggles, and socialization struggle. The combination of these multiple elements shaped the experiences of the participants and contributed to their success on their doctoral journeys.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Hispanic students who have earned a doctorate. This chapter presents my interpretation of the participants' experiences in relation to current literature. Based on the interpretation, I propose a new hermeneutic circle that captures the essence of these experiences and my interpretation as researcher. The chapter concludes with implications and recommendations for practice and research. Conclusions are derived from the experiences related through the stories/narratives shared by the participants.

#### **Discussion**

The section presents an analysis and interpretation of the themes in relation to current literature. In essence, the participants' doctoral journeys can be characterized as transcending experiences. Through the pursuit of higher education, the participants transformed themselves from low-income minority group members at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy to highly successful professionals in the elite group with prestigious doctoral degrees. Such transformation was achieved through a solid support system, self-discovery and development, and establishment of a clear identity. Three core components contributed to this transformation: (a) a journey of support, (b) a journey of self-discovery and self-development, and (c) a journey of identity development.

#### **A Journey of Support**

The support received from family and the negotiation of this support was a vital balance for the participants in this study. Many times the support came in the form of silence and at times in the form of questions. Nonetheless, the participants cited family



support as the most important aspect of their doctoral journey. Today, they form their own lives with a mix of who they were and who they have become. Overall, they still honor the structure of the family.

As documented in the literature, Hispanic/Latino parents seem to uphold strong support for educational goals. This is supported by the findings of this study. Hispanic families knew that coming to the United States would help to fulfill dreams of a better life (Fuligni, 1997). Even when unprepared to assist with the general aspects of school assignments, Hispanic parents and extended family members such as grandmothers and aunts (*abuelas* and *tias*) offered consistent encouragement. Family support influenced the participants' perception of education and shaped their doctoral journey in a positive manner.

Research suggests that, when parents are involved in their children's education, there is an increase in retention rates (Riggs & Medina, 2005). Findings from this study are consistent with that literature. Zarate and Gallimore (2005) noted that parents of Hispanic girls appear to characterize formal education as a means of counteracting their daughter's vulnerabilities related to gender. Direct and indirect parental influences are represented by the parents as messages of a "culture of possibility" (Gándara, 1995, p. 122). The faith that it is possible to move up and out of their current status is communicated and helped shape students' desire for college (Ceja, 2004). In this study, the interactions that Dr. Chemist had with her father throughout her early years helped to shape her "culture of possibility." Parental support also enhanced participants' confidence in themselves and strengthened their internal motivation, both of which were essential in breaking the cycle of poverty and lack of education for lower-income families.

Hispanic parents are cited as the most influential of any minority group in their children's educational aspirations (Clayton, 1993). Participants in this study discussed how their parents' expectations set a standard that had to be met. Parents stressed the importance of education to the participants, not only by providing them with better opportunities by migrating to the United States, but also by supporting the participants with essential basic needs.

In a recent policy brief by Gándara (2002), supportive family was identified as the primary motivator to students who strive for and achieve a doctoral degree. Although the notion of a supportive family can be complicated, as revealed by the participants, the overall impact on educational attainment was positive.

Contrary to cultural deficit perceptions of the role of Mexican families (Sowell, 1981a, 1981b) and consistent with comprehensive earlier work on educational achievement by Chicana/Latina students (Gándara, 1995), the important role of parents in academic success and educational aspirations was mentioned consistently by all 20 Chicana students in the study. Gándara (1995) noted that various factors must be present to facilitate the successful attainment of educational degrees by Hispanic/Chicano students. These elements include family support and mechanisms to access supportive systems. These high aspirations and support were evident in the six participants in this study.

Similarly, Chicana/Hispanic female students in Ceja's (2004) study reported that their parents had placed a strong value on college education, even though educational messages were not part of the day-to-day household conversations. In some instances, participants mentioned things that their parents said to them to make it clear that education was important. In other cases, it was not so much what the parents said through direct messages but what these Chicana students perceived to be important

because of being keenly aware of the conditions and struggles of their parents. Whether the importance of education was directly or indirectly inculcated in the minds of these Chicana students, the message about the value of education was translated into powerful motivation for these students not only to develop educational resiliency and do well in school but also to view college education as an attainable goal (Ceja, 2004). The findings in the current study are consistent with those in Ceja's study, even though the current participant group was not exclusively female. However, the female participants in this study were more forthcoming and shared personal experiences more frequently than did the male participants.

Latino families are often in the low-income minority group and, as is true with other minorities, are less informed about financial aid. As a result, they tend to overestimate the cost of tuition and underestimate available support (Pathways to College Network, 2004). Low-income, minority, and first-generation students are especially likely to lack specific types of "college knowledge." They often do not understand the steps necessary to prepare for higher education, which include knowing how to finance a college education, how to complete basic admission procedures, and how to make connections between career goals and educational requirements (Vargas, 2004). One example from this study is Elena, who was valedictorian of her high school class but did not have formal knowledge of higher education in her background, nor did her family know how to seek financial aid and scholarship possibilities for her higher education pursuits. Furthermore, the families of all of the participants had no knowledge about how to assist their children in navigating the college world.

First-generation Hispanic students perceive getting a college degree as an opportunity for advancement and personal growth and understanding (Abraham et al., 2002). These findings are supported by this study that revealed that defining an

understanding within oneself was vital to the participants' success on the doctoral journey. First-generation students want to accomplish something in life (Hicks & Dennis, 2005).

In examining higher education in the context of Hispanic first-generation college students, a cultural perspective of autonomy must be considered in order to fully understand the notion of family. Researchers have compared and contrasted the notion of interdependence from Hispanics and European Americans prospectively (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). For example, Fuligni et al. (1999) found that European culture promotes independence while Hispanic culture promotes interdependence. However, the apparent differences in culture values do not have a negative impact on the development of individuals' motivation for education. Rather, the emphasis on family from both cultures seems to be geared toward supporting one another throughout the life span. Kagitcibasi (2005) asserted that families in collectivist cultures, such as the one under study, could promote independence and interdependence simultaneously. Although my family, like the participant' families, had limited understanding of our educational journey, it is not surprising that each participant in this study credited family support to their success, despite their limited understanding of their educational journey.

In this study, the desire and motivation of the participants in giving back to their family after their academic success could also be partially explained by their cultural values. In an attempt to understand cultural variation in motivation, Rudy, Sheldon, Awong, and Tan (2007) distinguished between the *type* of motivation (ranging from controlled to autonomous, as conventionally measured) and the *subject* of motivation ("I" versus "my family and I"), creating measures of individual and inclusive academic motivation. The authors suggested that individualism, instead of autonomy, is less

strongly associated with life satisfaction in collectivist cultures (e.g., Hispanic culture) than in individualist cultures (e.g., American culture).

Ceja (2004) studied the manner in which low-income minority parents instill educational values in their children. He found that what Mexican/Hispanic parents say and do to influence the educational pathways of their children is grounded not in their educational success or established set of networks but rather in their economic, social, and occupational struggles. In other words, what the parents or family of the participants in Ceja's study have done, and what becomes clear in their responses, is that together they have defined their lived experiences and everyday realities. Therefore, it may be logical to conclude that what contributed to the success of the participants in this study was a sense of interdependence fueled by their parents and families and their ongoing support. The family support helped participants to redefine and maximize the educational opportunities that were available to them to be successful.

### **A Journey of Self-Discovery and Self-Development**

The participants in this study took personal responsibility for the direction of their lives and the result was the self-development and self-discovery of their future. To be able to do a self-assessment of one's life and identify reasons one is not happy requires honesty and soul searching. Depending on where one is in life and what one is looking to achieve, the journey to discovery and development in this study was the attainment of a doctoral degree. This goal came with the need for each individual participant to inventory goals and learn about self throughout the journey.

The participants took a transcending existence as revealed by Ochberg and Comeau (2001). The authors found that "upwardly mobile students see a connection between a social milieu . . . and a certain kind of personality, more exactly, some assumptions about what sort of person one should be" (p. 141). Participants in the

current study wanted to acquire knowledge and not live as their parents had done, so a transformational journey for them was necessary and one way to achieve it was through seeking a doctorate. Transformation involved adapting to the routine of the college life and course schedules and managing time around this new world called “college.” Many times the appearance of creating distance and/or intentionally creating the distance from family was necessary to allow the participants to accomplish their educational goals.

Participants in this study freely shared that they did not know anything about navigating the world of higher education. For students from families of first-generation Hispanic college students, having resources (both tangible and human networks) will increase the likelihood for them to achieve attainable goals. They must network and connect with caring faculty and peers and discover and develop skills and identity and know who they are. Those with knowledge must be specifically clear that the path to higher education is foreign and without clear messages at the beginning, often lost in the translation. It is vitally important that these first-generation Hispanic students recounted that they did not know how to begin their educational journey.

Gándara (2002) noted that many Hispanic students with low-income and working-class backgrounds will not make a successful transition to graduate school unless they receive a shift from high school to college. The reality of this transition (or shift, as Gándara called it) is that the start of college was the very beginning for those students and the participants in this study wanting a doctoral degree. The transcending journey started years before these students set their ultimate goal of a doctoral degree. As revealed by the findings, the participants did not always know that they wanted the doctoral degree, and this may be partially explained by their poor family financial condition. Growing up, their reality was formed by their financial and survival needs within the family structure.

Flaca attributed her successful transition to college to the supportive counselor who provided information on financial resources, along with her family support. The participants' transitions occurred after their departure on their long-term doctoral journey when they established their status in society and made valuable contributions in their respective fields.

Stories of first-generation students point to the resiliency of these individuals (Rodriguez, 1983; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). Specifically, scholars have found that these students rely heavily on self-motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalized locus of control to persist (Naumann et al., 2003); however, such studies documenting the successful achievements of these students, particularly beyond access to college, are few in number. Taken together, disproportionately little is known about the experiences of those first-generation students who persist to graduate school and about their experiences once they are enrolled.

As evidenced by findings of this study, the educational journey of first-generation Hispanic student participants at times created conflict in the Hispanic culture and the existing family structure. The struggle with the desire to establish independence as a professional while fulfilling family expectations proved to be difficult for the participants in this study. In the Hispanic culture, women are expected to assume the submissive role of caregiver and nurturer and stay close to family, while Hispanic men are expected to be the financial providers for the family.

Access to elite group membership (doctoral education) is often difficult for first-generation students, given factors such as lower socioeconomic status, educational background or status, and underrepresented and/or minority status (Hoffer et al., 2003). One way this access may be restricted is through implicit messages about "who has a place in the academy and who does not" (Kosut, 2006, p. 249). At the same time,

however, these students demonstrated a clear sense of resiliency in their willingness to overcome these barriers and could be described as tapping into other forms of capital as discussed by Yosso (2005), including aspirational capital, resistant capital, and navigational capital. First-generation Hispanic students may feel that this world of capital is a way to provide “gates” that keep them out of the academy. In reality, as these participants continued their journey toward the doctorate, they discovered that each of them held the skills and motivation for success.

For the participants in this study, knowledge about higher education and the pathway to a doctoral degree was initially elusive. The family support, peer support, and faculty mentors served as networks and had to be deliberate, with various resources that sustained the participants. The self-development took shape by the deliberate paths that they chose in their undergraduate and graduate decisions. Some examples are enrollment in an undergraduate program that nurtures and fosters graduate education. The exposure to undergraduate research experience boosted participants’ levels of confidence and resolution to continue their pursuit of higher education. Participants in this study noted at least one individual who possessed an academic credential and social and cultural capitals and who made an initial connection with higher education for them (Terenzini et al., 1996). In the case of these participants, faculty or program staff fulfilled this role. Whether it was a guidance counselor, a teacher, faculty member, college staff, or a peer, establishing a relationship with those holding more social and cultural capital was meaningful.

Research by Nettles and Millett (2006) exploring the role of socialization and race in doctoral students’ experiences and Ellis’s (2001) research on the role of race and gender in the socialization and satisfaction among doctoral students provide additional information on graduate students’ transition. These studies offer background on the



complex and sometimes invisible forces that influence the ability to complete a graduate degree. Some of the invisible forces are that first-generation Hispanic students are taught early on not to question authority but to listen.

Socialization in the graduate school context is explained as “the process by which students acquire the attitudes, beliefs, values, and skills needed to participate effectively in the organized activities of their profession” (Nettles & Millett, 2006, p. 89). In short, this socialization process is critical to doctoral student success (Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Although extensive data have been collected on doctoral student enrollment and completion, “the nature and status of socialization of doctoral students for academic and research careers, the reputed hallmarks of doctoral training, have been overlooked” (Nettles & Millett, 2006, p. 89). Of particular concern is socialization for students of color, as research across the field has shown them to experience poorer integration into the graduate community, both academically and socially. This lack of integration disrupts the socialization process and can lead to lower academic performance and persistence (Nettles & Millett, 2006; Simpson, 2002). Consequently, these students are likely to find it difficult to engage in the lively discussions that are common practices in a doctoral-level classroom. When the journey becomes stagnant, the students, such as those in this study, “freeze.” This action will be taken as a sign of not knowing or not wanting to grow and learn. Hence, it was important for participants in this study to know how to navigate the academic journey.

The lens of social capital is often used by researchers to analyze the first-generation student’s experience (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004). As defined by Bourdieu (1977), social capital is the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and

recognition—in other words, to membership in a group” (p. 103). Social capital emerges through both structure and process. Social capital as structure highlights the frequency, duration, and opportunities for social interactions, while social capital as a process emphasizes the quality and content of those interactions (Lin, 2001). Coming from a two-parent home or having conversations about attending college with a family member are examples of these two types of social capital. These conversations did not occur in the participating students’ families, although the messages that portray college as being vital and important were present throughout. Hence, the question is, who will help in the journey of self-discovery or self-development? The successful recipients of a doctoral degree must assist the following generations.

Access to social capital generally enables reproduction of additional forms of capital. Cultural capital, for example, is applicable to first-generation students in that it refers to “specialized or insider knowledge which is not taught in schools, such as knowledge of high culture, and to educational credentials” (Walpole, 2003, p. 49). Specifically, the accumulation of cultural capital can facilitate access to higher economic status by providing “one avenue that people use to display their social class and involve themselves in the values and expectations of their environment” (Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004, p. 101). The pathway to graduate school, which was the focus of this study, is still a dream for many first-generation Hispanic students and will not become easier as they navigate the educational system.

### **A Journey of Identity Development**

Participants in this study started as first-generation Hispanic students who came from impoverished backgrounds. The experiences that they encountered in their journey formed their present identity. In the development of their identity, the participants

struggled with their Hispanic culture, the American culture, and the adoption of their own identity with blended aspects of both.

In addition to encountering a new environment in academia, participants had to come to terms with the dramatic changes in their identities. This change was one of the more difficult realities of their doctoral journey. The literature on identity development suggests that most significant changes occur in the undergraduate years for first-generation Hispanic students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). From the narratives/stories in this study, the identity challenges were just as notable and dramatic in the doctoral level as those in the undergraduate years. The participants dealt with this challenge by separating from family, who were often not ready for the student's new identity. The irony is that each of the participants accomplished life-changing goals by attaining a doctoral degree.

A study conducted by K. P. Gonzalez (2001) illustrated identity changes in the six narratives of Latina doctoral students' experiences. The students in that study struggled with their identity, much like the participants in the current study; as a result, they developed a dual identity to sustain the family back home and the honor of their educational accomplishments. All six participants in this study expressed not wanting to forget where they came from. The memory of their identity created a state of confusion about who they really are in life.

The participants in this study were often perplexed about their new world. However, they maintained the perspective of investing their energies into the accomplishment of their goals. What was their motivation? Individuals may be motivated not from an "I" perspective but from a larger perspective of "my family and I" (Rudy et al., 2007).

One can be non-autonomous in one's independence, by breaking relational ties to prove one's self-worth or appease some other controlling forces. The concepts

that do appear to be antithetical, then, are not relatedness and autonomy, but relatedness and independence. (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 273)

Faculty mentoring of students in the formation and development of identity is vital for students aspiring to achieve a doctoral degree. Students in successful mentoring relationships are actively aware of the capital required for constructing successful and recognizable researcher identities. Faculty mentors have particular ideas about what it means to be a researcher, and the students' concepts may or may not align with their mentors' conceptualizations of what it means to be a researcher and take on identities of their mentors (Quaye, 2007). The result for students is that their identity is developed through mentoring practices. This results in intellectual diversity and cultural capital of the profession. All of the participants in this study engaged in mentoring during their undergraduate and graduate years. If the mentoring was not present in their graduate program, they sought a relationship due to their early exposure as an undergraduate.

The issue of identity resonates with the autobiographical essays in *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Rodriguez, 1983), which evolves with his journey in education and depicted in the six popular essays. The second essay, "The Achievement of Desire," narrates his pursuit of education, which alienates him from his relatively uneducated, Spanish-speaking parents. Dr. Chemist related the same alienation in her doctoral journey and the decision to stay away from home when she could not explain her day-to-day struggles with her journey. Participants in this study noted a challenge in establishing a sense of belonging. For example, their roles in family and a sense of belonging before and after the doctorate program have noticeably changed. The sense of belonging can be debilitating at the start of a doctoral program, as was the case with Dr. Teacher in the first year of his doctoral program. In other words, there was still a sense of doubt and lack of knowing his own "new identity," which was one of a

doctoral student—someone who would eventually become a scholar and recipient of a doctorate.

The achievement of a degree brings intellectual recognition but the journey is paved with difficult cultural choices. This socialization process is particularly visible to doctoral students, who are aware that the goal of doctoral work is to create an identity as a scholar in the discipline, with little regard for the salience of a person's previous identity (Castellanos, Gloria, & Kamimura, 2006). Ibarra (2001) referred to this process as the metamorphosis of the individual "from one ethnic culture into another" (p. 89). Many times the participants felt that they could not articulate their growth and new attitudes and opinions, which were in direct contrast with their families' beliefs or were seen as disrespectful. Although Flaca's family members had little knowledge of higher education, she consulted with them regarding her decision to pursue an advanced degree. The pursuit of a doctoral degree contributed to alienation from family. There is great variability in the values and goals held within various cultures, as well as the means by which one satisfies basic needs. In other words, "the relations between specific behaviors and satisfaction of underlying needs may be different in different cultures because the behaviors come to have different meaning in accord with culturally endorsed values and practices" (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 26). As discussed earlier in this study, the Hispanic culture maintains very specific behaviors and underlying meanings.

Another conflict is that Hispanics who achieve success such as a doctoral degree are expected to bring financial success and economic well-being to the family of origin. These cultural expectations explained why the participants in this study felt obligated to their families once they had earned their degree. Ultimately, scholarly development or doctoral training requires students to be engaged in a transformative process (Ibarra, 2001). A transformation took place again as each of the participants reflected on the

journey during the interviews. Any family conflicts created discomfort but also brought illumination for the participants as they navigated their lives around the educational achievement. These effects are authenticated in a book published *The Latina/o Pathway to the Ph.D.* by Castellanos et al. (2006). The authors stated that transformation is evident in each of their narratives in the book, despite the cultural incongruity experienced by the doctoral students in their journey. The cultural values and the surrounding academic culture require students to learn to balance the two elements while transcending the experience of attaining a doctoral degree. These two elements, as Castellans et al. (2006) noted, are like two worlds where students feel they live. Probably the most fascinating theme that emerged from current participants' experiences related to having to live in two worlds: the world of their family back home and the world of higher education. Laura explained, "I can't act a certain way when I'm home because my family looks at me like I'm crazy sometimes, then I feel bad and don't want to go home." Elena explained it as a vicious cycle that, even today as a recipient of a doctoral degree, she has to navigate when visiting her mother and father. The participants are caught between a poor working-class life experience and the world of academia. Participants expressed that living in this space between their backgrounds and their aspirations was often challenging. They shared that sometimes their parents understood why they would want to go to college but were less supportive and understanding of a decision to pursue a graduate degree. In this study, the participants learned to navigate the two worlds sometimes by isolating or distancing themselves from their family, which may have resulted in feelings of guilt. The issues faced by the participants in this study are typical of what the literature has documented; their struggle with dual identities resulted by cultural expectations and academic life sometime became unbearable. The

guilt associated with “betraying” their families bothered the participants and their family members did not always understand the thoughts shared by the participants.

One must keep culture in mind in an examination of this study and, at the same time, maintain an understanding that individuals with their own unique meaning carry cultural preconceptions. However, in examining the motivation for higher education among Hispanic first-generation students, it is vital to incorporate the discovery of meaning.

Identity development processes are central to adopting preferences in certain cultural values and systems. Atkinson (1989) proposed that ethnic identity development follows five distinct stages: (a) conformity (preference for values of the dominant culture instead of one’s own cultural group); (b) dissonance (confusion and conflict regarding the dominant culture’s system and one’s own group’s cultural system); (c) resistance and immersion (active rejection of the dominant system and acceptance of one’s own cultural group’s traditions and customs); (d) introspection (questioning the values of both the minority and majority cultures); and (e) synergistic articulation and awareness (resolution of conflicts in previous stages and developing a cultural identity that selects elements from both the dominant and minority cultural group’s values (p. 210). All of this study participants appeared to depict Atkinson’s five stages, although participants may have gone through the stages at different times due to the their own life struggles and challenges throughout their journey.

For participants in this study, the designation of being a member of a lower social class often translated into a perception of being inferior—a feeling of “less than.” At the same time, their “less than” sense of self was often reinforced and strengthened by the stereotypes that others had of low-income Americans. Whether they had limited access to education opportunities or felt the need to “make up” for the lack of educational

resources, throughout the interviews the participants talked candidly about the role of *class* in their lives—how their lives had been profoundly influenced by their class status. Deci and Ryan (1985) claimed that “the reward for competency motivated behavior is the inherent feeling of competence that results from effective functioning, yet the motivation is such that the feelings seem to result from continual expansion of one’s capacities” (p. 27). All participants shared feelings and/or thoughts of inferiority and related that they had funneled them into success as they strengthened their skills.

The challenges of higher education offer opportunities for gaining a sense of accomplishment via successful performance within the academic environment and gaining a college degree, especially a terminal degree. This is especially true and meaningful for the participants in this study due to being the first in their family to graduate from college. All six participants expressed the desire to gain a degree despite obstacles on their journey. They were highly cognizant of their family’s socioeconomic status and financial struggles. They detailed a strong resiliency to overcome these financial and social class struggles and shared their desire for a better life. Their parents wanted a better life for their children and believed that education was the means by which to achieve it. A belief existed that, if one applied oneself through hard work, great potential was possible. The participants in this study shared this sentiment and often expressed that they had a strong work ethic, often passed on from their parents. A palpable sense of hope and potential was exhibited by all of the participants as to what college could and would do for them.

A common obstacle for students was their home language and communication versus their “new academic world” identity. Students quickly found that their own words often separated them from their families and communities when they returned home. Many times the participants in this study adhered to the expectations of the culture on



their home visits, such as the women eating after the men or indulging in traditional foods with high fat content to appease elder family members. The participants provided valuable insights into a culture that prevails with what others may consider to be outdated traditions and stereotypical behavior.

The three core components discussed above contributed to the successful journey of the six first-generation Hispanic doctoral recipients. It is reasonable to conclude that the American dream has come true for the participants in this study, even though transformation sometimes appeared to be a perceived loss of the traditions and values of *familia*.

### **A New Conceptual Framework**

Based on the participants' narratives/stories and the major themes, I propose a new conceptual framework—a revised hermeneutic circle (Figure 16)—that captures the essence and my interpretation of the “lived experience” of the six participants. In a phenomenological study, the term *hermeneutics* is an art and science of interpretation (Van Manen, 1990). A hermeneutic circle is a process of interpreting a text (narratives in this study (Gadamer, 1983). In a hermeneutic circle, the individual parts of the text inform the understanding of the whole, so the interpreter moves back and forth between the whole and the parts. This interpretative process is ongoing and reiterated until the emergence of a construction of the whole phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 1997).

The large arrows on each side of the circle represents dialogue (interviews with six doctoral graduates) between the “researcher” and “lived experiences of doctoral journeys” whereby experiences are continuously reflected upon and interpreted, thereby creating a hermeneutic dialectic circle (Gadamar, 1983). The clearest example of the application of journeys lies within the context from which it emerged.

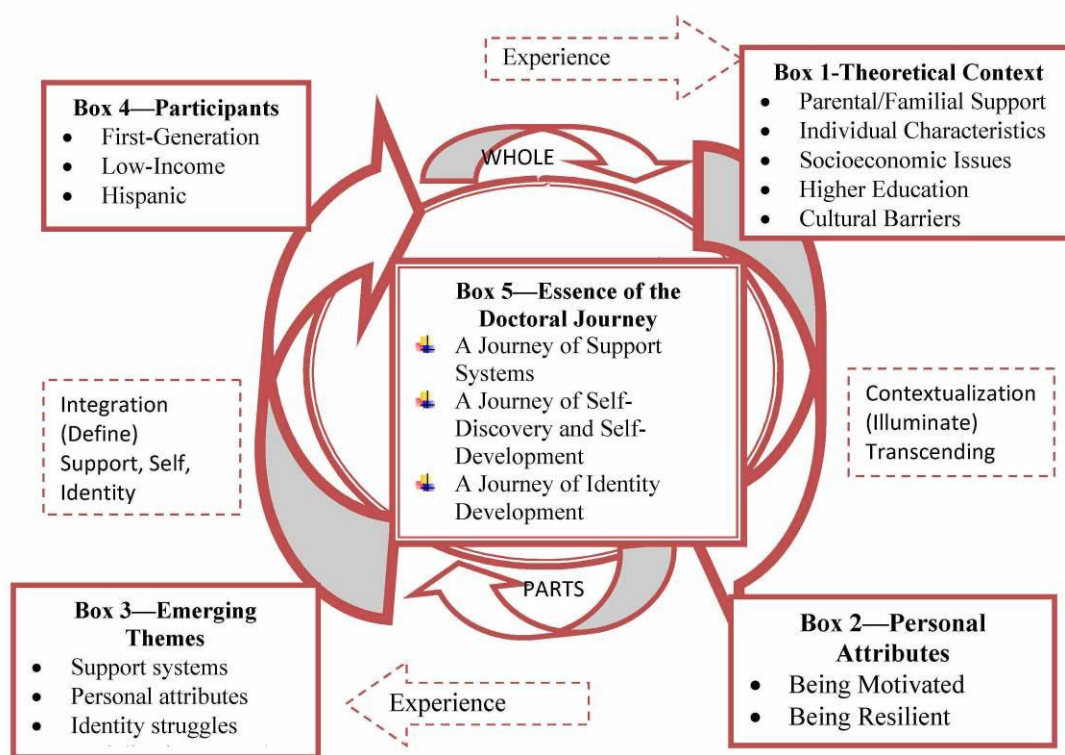


Figure 16. A hermeneutic circle of first-generation Hispanic students with a doctoral degree. Adapted from (a) *Dimensions of the Hermeneutic Circle*, by R. Bontekoe, 1996, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International; and (b) “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” by H. Gadamer, 1983, pp. 88-138 in F. G. Lawrence (Trans.), *Reason in the Age of Science*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

The circle illustrates all aspects of the parts and understands that each has its own cycle that is constant and continuous. The circle is only a representation of the individual’s experience. The arrows around the central circle are the constant flow of the emerging phenomenon and the individual immersed in the experience. This honors each participant’s lived experience, while encompassing the various factors (family, cultural barriers, beliefs, challenges, and values) that may contribute to or hinder a successful outcome for future first-generation Hispanic doctoral recipients.

In Figure 16, the parts consist of the four boxes. Box 1 represents the theoretical context of the study and core constructs informing the research topic. Box 2 represents

one major theme of the study, which is the personal attributes unique to the six participants. Box 3 embodies the four major themes of the study. Box 4 reflects the unique characteristics (criteria) of the population for the study. At the core of the hermeneutic circle is the central phenomenon under study (Box 5). All of these boxes interact to shape the experiences and realities of the participants in a unique context of this study.

In Figure 16, the hermeneutic circle is depicted as a whole in the context of this study. I incorporated the themes, the attributes observed, the literature comparison, and the sharing of unique understandings by interpretive meanings, using iterative examination to expand understanding. Interpretation always occurs in a circle in which all parts are interpreted within some understanding of the context, which in turn is understood by coming to grips with the parts (Thachankary, 1992). The result fits all important parts into a consistent, coherent whole within the current context (Myers, 2004). The diagram illustrates the hermeneutic circle, which is constant and continuous, for the participants' lived experiences in this study. This supports the notion developed by presenting the data (interviews) by extracting thematic phrases and assigning themes that align with the "phenomenological nod" that confirms the hermeneutic approach for this study—that moment when the researcher and participant understand. We seek to understand the meaning (Van Manen, 1990).

This study was presented at a conference of peers to receive feedback, which was vital in clarifying the themes and subthemes of the study. The presentation was successful and appropriate within this framework. This resolved the issues of systematic reflection and collaboration meaning that the processes could both be understood and validated as one of the doctoral journey, as well as the meaning of that journey.

Consequently, the hermeneutic circle is a metaphor for understanding and interpretation that is viewed as movement between parts (data) and whole (evolving understanding of the phenomenon), each giving meaning to the other such that it is circular and iterative.

As Gadamer (1983) noted, it is not really we who address the texts of tradition, but the canonic texts that address us. Our prejudices, whatever aspects of our cultural horizon that we take for granted, are now brought into the open in the encounter with the past.

### **Researcher's Reflections**

As I engaged in the interviews at certain times, I felt as if the interviewee was the researcher and I was the participant. I became involved in the interviews by my natural association as a first-generation Hispanic doctoral student. The process during the interviews was at once laborious and exciting. I was nervous during my first interview. Once I had developed trust with each one of them, I could sense at times a moment when I understood their experience without saying a word. All participants shared openly with me. I am honored for the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their unique and individual experiences.

Only later, while reflecting on the interviews, could I apprehend what the discussion was like (Van Manen, 1990). This reflection did not come easy; it came only after many hours of reflection with the data and reflection on my journey. I started to see my participants as co-researchers. They created a time and place that I can only express as a halo effect that brings me a joy, sadness, happiness and illumination of my own journey and learning to respect each of my participants journey. Engaging with the participants during the study has enabled me to reflect on my own experiences as a doctoral student and educator.

As I look back to the beginning of my re-admission into the program in 2008, I realized that it would be one of the biggest challenges in my life. I had no cohort because they had either graduated or had discontinued the journey. I learned that reading for hours enlightened me and proved to be an emotional support of sorts. The interesting perspective that I gained is that I had to navigate extra courses, readings, and research that required extensive time to assess and analyze. I can honestly say that it was rewarding but a most challenging and difficult experience for me. My dissertation chair told me, “Mary, just write.” I would think, “Write what?” I would freeze and think about my family most of the time. I would also think about my co-workers and all my family that would benefit from the completion of my doctorate. I could give more back to my family, co-workers, and others who come after me. I have transformed into a different person and the changes have shaped who I am today.

Now that I look back on the wonderful participants who shared their lives and tears with me, I feel that I needed to be a part of that experience to understand the essence of the experience. My participants often asked me during interviews whether I understood what they were telling me with respect to their feelings of “isolation” even from those closest to them. I shared that I understood their feelings and experiences and could relate these exchanges in our time together. The shared feelings brought me closer to the participants’ experience and allowed me to obtain richer information. One female participant sent pictures of her baby; another has inquired about progress with this dissertation. I shared, “I am still making strides in that direction.”

The doctoral journey for me was isolating and confusing at times. However, through this experience I have grown in the discovery of related lived experiences of others and myself. Being a first-generation Hispanic doctoral student walking in a path that no one in my family has ever walked, I am sure that no one, including myself, was

prepared for the length of time it would take me to finish. In the past year family members have quietly questioned whether I was really working on a doctoral degree! My family provided silent, transparent support, which I know is there. I was mostly overwhelmed with the inability to articulate my questions or doubts with my peers or my chair. Being a distance learner was difficult in itself. My advisor and chair was instrumental in getting me to this point. Her faith in me gave me a revitalized confidence to finish. The rest of my committee, although new to me, were consistently supportive and inquisitive and engaged in the process to help me make the transition to the last phase of the journey. Their support and suggestions were invaluable. I no longer have to feel inferior; instead, I hope to inspire others in my future. The process humbled me, and my foundation rests on the woman whom my mother raised and a deeper sense of pride for the future of others on their own doctoral journey.

### **Practical Implications**

As the Hispanic population continues to increase in number, understanding this group has important implications for the future workplace. While findings of this study should not be generalized to represent the entire Hispanic population, it has shed light on some core characteristics and struggles of this minority group, who will account for a large portion of the future workforce. A wide range of audiences could benefit from the insights generated from this study, including first-generation Hispanic students with educational aspirations, secondary school educators and administrators, postsecondary educators and institutional systems, HRD/workforce development practitioners, and policy makers.

For first-generation Hispanic students, this study offered stories/narratives and experiences to which they may easily relate and focus their motivation on doctoral degrees. As revealed in this study, education proved to be a powerful tool for making a

positive change in life. Each participant transformed himself or herself from a low-income, low-social-status minority group member to an accomplished professional in an elite group. Such socioeconomic transformation through education presents a promising picture to others in the same or similar situations. It is my hope that, by sharing these seven stories (including my own), I can inspire more first-generation Hispanics to pursue higher education for the benefit of themselves, their family, and the larger society.

It is important for educators at secondary levels to develop curricula that offer additional rigorous academic preparation and build self-efficacy. Examples include offering advanced placement and gifted and talented courses to first-generation Hispanic students (Olive, 2008). Further, it is important that educators act as mentors to first-generation Hispanic students, given that these students often come from families with little or no knowledge about the education systems in the United States. As related by the study participants, mentorship was a key contributor to their success on the doctoral journey. Therefore, I encourage educators and career counselors in the school setting to play a more proactive role in helping this group of students. Matching students with potential mentors and involving students in formal mentoring programs prior to or as soon as they begin college are examples of assistance that schools can offer. One such example is the statewide funding provided by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to establishment “Go Centers” in low-income high schools across the state to present college students as role models so high school students understand and complete the processes for obtaining financial aid and applying to college.

In fact, mentorship must be a priority for educators, as it is an effective strategy to increase the likelihood of student success in educational settings. It will also facilitate student transition into a new environment and reduce the anxiety and stress revealed by the study participants. In addition, given the stated importance of family support, it is

critical that schools form partnerships with families and stimulate Hispanic students' aspiration for higher education. These applications will assist students in being academically ready and hence increase the overall ability of first-generation Hispanic students and others to overcome other barriers present in educational settings.

Schools district administrators should reform curriculum to offer additional rigorous academic preparation that facilitates self-efficacy in college, courses such as advanced placement and gifted and talented courses promoted with adequate representation in these courses by first-generation Hispanic students (Olive, 2009). High school personnel can build bridges to mentors on college campuses. Students who have a mentor at the beginning of their college career are more likely to succeed. Therefore, putting students in contact with potential mentors or involving them in a formal mentoring program prior to or as soon as they begin college would be an invaluable collaboration between high school and university student service personnel. In fact, this must be a priority action on behalf of students who enter the university at a high risk of dropping out. Several of the students in this study were in a precollege program that assisted in the transition to a higher education setting. Programs such as College Assistance Migrant Program, Upward Bound, and Upward Bound Math and Science are examples of programs that start the process of transition prior to the senior year and provide critical services in financial aid and admissions assistance, along with critical first-year support services.

Parents are unfamiliar with the complex policies and practices of the educational system, which require a high level of parent knowledge and involvement, particularly with respect to academic preparation for college. Despite high aspirations for children of Hispanics, they are the least educated of all ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Early in secondary education, schools can form alliances with parents by bringing them



into the schools to foster the aspirations of children. Schools can form groups that meet regularly in the evenings and provide resources such as those provided by Texas Guaranteed Student Loans called “Train the Trainer,” TRIO programs, and Generation Texas, that work with migrant parents and invite alumni students who have completed college degrees to speak at school functions. Schools in predominately Spanish-speaking neighborhoods can include Spanish materials and presenters to engage conversations in the native language of parents who want to see their children succeed in school. Parent meetings that foster support, such as parent orientations geared toward first-generation parents, are needed to navigate students through their journey.

Families play a central role in the establishment of educational goals of first-generation students. It is important for parents to be active participants in their children’s academic lives early in their educational experience. It is understandable that parents of first-generation students do not have all of the answers related to the educational system. However, resources can be nonmonetary, come in the form of support and encouragement, and simply being present at parent meetings and asking the questions that explore the world of academia.

Educators and administrators at secondary and postsecondary institutions can play an important part in the success of first-generation Hispanic students. Support programs that involve financial support, academic resources, and mentoring in the critical transition periods of a student’s academic journey (such as high school to college, undergraduate to graduate, and even doctoral programs) can sponsor mentoring programs where faculty can work with students in establishing practices that model successful outcome for students.

As shown by the results of this study, family is important throughout the Hispanic educational journey. Doctoral faculty help Hispanic students to become

successful in a multitude of ways by fostering supportive and nurturing diverse views and identities of their students. K. P. Gonzalez and Marin (2002) cited that one of the main sources of motivation for minority doctoral students is that their research agenda connects to their ethnic background.

When developing doctoral programs, administrators should reconsider the relationship between the program's goals and the actual experiences of students in the program (Gonzalez, K. P., & Marin, 2002). Graduate school should nurture doctoral students' interests and prepare them to become successful faculty members (Hoffer et al., 2004). Related to the above points, this study offers implications for HRD/workforce development practitioners in the higher education context.

The participants in this study were first-generation Hispanic college students, but they are not representative of all members of this ethnic group or cultural affiliation. It is important to gain understanding regarding the dynamics that contribute to the pursuit of a terminal degree when only 1,370 of the total 26,917 doctorates awarded in the United States in 2006 were granted to persons identified as Hispanic (Hoffer, Hess, Welch, & Williamson, 2007). The study of first-generation Hispanic students has implications for higher education and HRD. The desire for higher education in Hispanic first-generation students is a complex phenomenon. As Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) suggested, these students make choices based on their unique worldviews. It is important that higher education administrators learn about these unique perspectives and factors that promote educational aspiration in order to support the desire to obtain a doctoral degree.

For policy makers, this study offered some insights for further consideration. As revealed by the study, Hispanics students often begin formal schooling without adequate economic or social resources, compared to other groups in the country. Schools are not always equipped to compensate for these initial disparities. The lack of financial support

and educational opportunities will likely hinder Hispanics' ability to contribute to the future workforce. As the trend of Hispanic population increases continue, it becomes more imperative to formulate policies that will aid socioeconomically disadvantaged first-generation Hispanic students to attend higher education for knowledge and skill development. One good example is the McNair Scholars Program cited in this study. More programs like this should be developed and implemented.

Policy makers should be informed about the quantifiable benefits of programs that support accessibility and attainment. Through effective assessment, legislators will have the data needed to continue funding these important programs. Unfortunately, many federally funded programs have seen reductions in their budgets in the past 2 years. This is not surprising, given the strain on both federal and state budgets. However, if accessibility to higher education is to be made realistic, then efforts to support these programs must be sustained. The participants in this study reiterated the need for support programs on their doctoral journey. The success of the rapidly growing Hispanic population is no longer limited to the interests of a region, state, or part of a region in Texas. The Hispanic population is now the majority in Texas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The success of the Hispanic group in the U.S. population should now be a national priority for the future of America. This point was best stated by Cisneros (2009) in *Latinos and the Nation's Future*:

Latino potential is of no longer a side-bar interest; it is now a basic shaping force of the American future. Therefore, we advise that it is in the nation's interest to harness its market growth, to develop its educational potential, to engage its community-building energies, and to transform it into the backbone of the next American middle class. (p. xiv)

Educational attainment by the Hispanic population will play a critical role in facilitating social mobility. HRD professionals and educators must work hand-in-hand to promote the progress of this population.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Due to time and financial constraints, the study was bounded to a specific set of criteria. First, this study focused on six first-generation Hispanic doctoral recipients from a Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program. Hence, generalization of findings would be inappropriate. Future research should include more doctoral recipients to compare their experiences to those in this study. The participants in this study were only of Hispanic/Latino origin; future studies should look at other ethnic populations who are first-generation students and of low income who have attained a doctoral degree. Further exploration of the characteristics could provide additional empirical evidence to understand the experiences for these populations from a different cultural perspective.

Second, this study focused on students who attended a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and obtained a doctoral degree. Several of the participants first attended a large university and transferred to a smaller university. A similar study should be conducted to examine the differences in students who achieved a doctoral degree at a large university as opposed to a smaller regional university. Based on the emergent themes and findings from this study, it is unclear whether geography would make a difference in individual experiences of first-generation Hispanic students. HSIs play an important role in providing Hispanics with access to college education. (HSIs are public or private degree-granting institutions in which Hispanics comprise 25% or more of the undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment. According to U.S. Department of Education [2007], nearly one half of all Hispanics are enrolled in an HSI in Texas.) This warrants further research to determine whether students have a higher probability of success when attending a university in which they are the majority. There are limited evaluations of the effectiveness of HSIs in terms of their matriculation rates, graduation rates, and graduate degrees. Further research should adopt other research methodology

(i.e., quantitative) to understand how successful these institutions are in services for first-generation Hispanic students.

Third, participants reported intrinsic motivation to pursue advanced degrees, even in instances where advanced educational levels resulted in alienation from the family of origin. Finding ways to ameliorate the sense of alienation for first-generation learners, both in undergraduate and graduate experiences, would be a helpful addition to the literature. Further investigation into the potential contribution of student support strategies and the role of intrinsic motivation is recommended.

Fourth, an area of research that should be considered for exploration in the future is to compare the results of a first-generation college student population to that of a non-first-generation college student cohort. Furthermore, future research that explores the different experiences of first-generation students who grew up in affluent families could illustrate variances between socioeconomic and social class groups and explore those students who did not persist in the doctoral program.

Fifth, the journey for each participant in this study was unique, and this insight led to a proposed new hermeneutic circle (Figure 16) in a context to encompass all factors that emerged in this study. More empirical evidence should be collected to validate the rigor of this modified circle.

Sixth, this study presented one methodological approach to studying first-generation Hispanic doctoral students. The intent of using the phenomenological design was to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Any generalization of the findings is inappropriate. I encourage researchers to embrace different research paradigms and designs, such as case studies, surveys, and longitudinal studies, to generate different data that will enrich understanding of this group.

## **Conclusions**

Although participation in higher education has expanded to include numerous groups that were previously excluded from the academy, several barriers still exist for people who are first-generation Hispanic college students. Doctoral education serves a key role in the U.S. higher education system. The academy produces faculty and scholars to engage in conversations that serve to train future generations of students. Access to doctoral education for first-generation Hispanic students ensures a more diverse academic academy.

This study was designed to understand the meaning of the lived experience of first-generation Hispanic students who had obtained a doctoral degree. Emergent were four themes that illustrated support systems, personal attributes, identity struggles, and socialization struggles. The support from family was clearly a common theme among all participants, along with their own struggles to grow and acclimate to the world of academia while counteracting their own lower socioeconomic status. The participants navigated their educational path to success via their own personal attributes at various critical points in their lives. The four themes were examined and, upon extensive compare-and-contrast analysis, three core components were related to three transformational elements in the participants' journey to the doctoral degree for the six first-generation Hispanic students in this study.

As a researcher, I learned several lessons throughout the study. The data collection process required total immersion in planning and organizing the interviews due to the geographic locations of participants. Extensive notes and writing were required to reflect and honor the participants and their shared stories.

### **Optimizing Interviews**

Interviews with some participants required extensive travel by the researcher. I had not planned on the extensive financial investment required for this study. The emotional investment was also extensive, with my participants along with optimizing my face-to-face interviews. The photographs contributed to a deeper understanding of the participants. Therefore, to optimize the interview, it is prudent to consider at what time of day a participant is usually the most alert. Both the participants and their caregivers were keenly aware of this. To elicit the lived experience and interpret the findings, it is vital that a researcher engage and maximize the time with participants.

### **Revise and Resubmit**

The reported findings are a result of extensive writing, rewriting, and at times stepping away, which posed a problem for me, to come back and engage the data with a fresh perspective. Another aspect of this study was the ability to capture the story of each participant, which required several versions of the narrative to arrive at a final story/narrative.

### **Unique Journey**

Everyone is a unique individual; to capture the place and time of full understanding of what the participant had experienced in the journey was a process. The journey to the doctorate, although unique to each participant, is a collective experience in that many of the themes in this study were shared experiences for me as well. The participants were changed by participating in this study.

The introduction of a new conceptual hermeneutic circle encompassed the entire doctoral journey for each individual by relating the past, the present, and the future of each individual's journey. This deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the unique journey for each participant can have a significant impact on higher education

successes. Understanding the phenomenon of this hermeneutic phenomenological study can lead to successful transitions to graduate programs for first-generation Hispanic students.

The benefits of acquiring a college degree are many, and the consequences of not obtaining one can be costly. The future of the workforce in Texas and nationally is directly related to the lack of educational outcomes for first-generation Hispanic students and should be a growing concern for HRD. Creating an effective system through which students from first-generation families and/or underrepresented groups can acquire the requisite skills to enroll and persist in college is an important task that calls for immediate and continuing attention. It is important not only for those who stand to benefit from receiving a college education, but also for a society that depends on education to spawn innovation, creativity, and advancement to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive global environment. The first-generation populations are not like other demographics. More help is needed to reach the goals and realize the dreams that society and these students have created for themselves.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**TELEPHONE SCRIPT FOR INITIAL CONTACT**

Hello, (Potential Participant)

I hope that you can remember me from your undergraduate years and participation in the Ronald E. McNair Scholars program you took part in at the university. I called you today to make contact with you to confirm contact information and to confirm the completion of a doctoral degree. Congratulations on the doctoral attainment.

I am currently a doctoral student at Texas A&M University, in fulfillment of my doctoral dissertation I am conducting a study entitled "Journey to a Doctorate: The Experiences of First-Generation Hispanic Students"

I am interested in your experience with your doctoral journey. I would like to send you additional information on my study and a consent form by email. I hope that you will want to take part in my study. I will be sending a recruitment flier for your review and a consent form, which you can print and fill out if you decide to be part of my study, which will explain aspects of the study.

Would you be willing to give me an email where I can send you the information? Participation in the study is voluntary and responses will be kept confidential and in a secure and locked file cabinet.

Thank you so much for your support. I am glad that I was able to contact you and hope that you will review the information I will be sending.

Congratulations on your degree. Once again thank you for your time. Goodbye.



**APPENDIX B**  
**RECRUITMENT FLIER**

Dear Prospective Participant:

I am writing to ask your help in a study as a former Ronald E. McNair Scholar program participant who has completed a doctoral degree. I hope all is well since our contact via phone prior to this flier. This study is an attempt to understand your lived experience with your doctoral journey. The title of the study is “Journey to a Doctorate: the Experiences of First-generation Hispanic Students”.

Below are the criteria for participants.

1. Must self identify as first-generation college graduates (neither parent has a college degree),
2. Must identify as Hispanic/Latino ethnicity,
3. Must have already attained a doctoral degree in the following fields (Ph.D., Ed.D, or M.D.).

If you fit into the criteria above and agree to participant, I will conduct an individual face-to-face interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Each interview will be audio taped which you will need to consent to on the consent form. The interview will be conducted at a time and location of your choice.

Prior to the interview you will be asked to provide a picture, that illustrates your journey and a copy will be made to return your photo after the interview. The picture will be used in my final presentation. Your name will be kept confidential and will not be revealed you will be asked to choose another name to be used in the study.

If you are interested in being part of the study please call me at 1-(361)-455-6811 or email me at [kamlp00@tamuk.edu](mailto:kamlp00@tamuk.edu). The attached consent form will need to be filled out and returned via scanned email with signature or postal address 1209 Craig Circle, Alice, Texas 78332.

Thank you very much in advance and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,  
Maria L. Gonzalez, Doctoral Candidate  
Texas A&M University, Educational Human Resource Development  
[Kamlp00@tamuk.edu](mailto:Kamlp00@tamuk.edu)

## APPENDIX C

### TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research project entitled “Journey to a Doctorate: The Experiences of First-Generation Hispanic Students”. The aim of the research is to understand the doctoral journey for each participant and get your lived experience. You were selected to be a possible participant because you meet the criteria specified for this study.

This study is in fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of a dissertation.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to do the following chose a pseudonym to utilize for data gathered: a) turn in a photograph that represents your journey or symbolize your experience. Hand to the researcher the day of the interview (the photograph will be shown the day of the presentation of the study); b) participate in an in-depth/ face-to-face interview (in English) with the researcher, which will be audio taped and will last approximately 60-90 minutes; c) participate in a follow up interview to clarify any issues or questions; d) review and make any necessary changes to your interview transcript and return to the researcher via email. The researcher will take field notes during the interviews, to enhance the information that you are providing. The photograph will be returned to you and the video image will be taken of the photograph right after the interview and labeled with the pseudonym chosen by you.

#### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

#### **Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University

#### **Will I be compensated?**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential and confidentiality will be maintained and ensured via the use of pseudonyms. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only the principle investigator Maria L. Gonzalez and the advisor Dr. Jia Wang will have access to the records. Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely in a locked cabinet and only the principle investigator, Maria L. Gonzalez and Dr. Jia Wang, will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for a period of one year and then erased. All consent forms will be kept in storage at the university locked in a file cabinet for a period of three years.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact my faculty committee chair, Dr. Jia Wang, (979) 862-7808, or via email [jjawang@tamu.edu](mailto:jjawang@tamu.edu) or the researcher, Maria L. Gonzalez, (361) 455-6811, or via email [kamlp00@tamuk.edu](mailto:kamlp00@tamuk.edu)

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**Participation**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. If you would like to be in the study, please read and sign the consent form enclosed. Please use the enclosed self addressed envelope to return the consent form.

**Voluntary Consent**

I acknowledge that I have been informed of the nature and purposes of this research by Maria Gonzalez and that I have read and understand the information presented above, and that I have received a copy of this form for my records. I give voluntary consent to participate in this research.

**Signature**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not want to be audio recorded.

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### **“JOURNEY TO A DOCTORATE: THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION HISPANIC STUDENTS”**

Interview Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: Maria L. Gonzalez

(Confidential) Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Education: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

“The purpose of this study is to understand your experience of your doctoral journey and how you experienced your journey to complete the doctoral degree. Confidentiality of responses will be ensured via the use of pseudonyms. Your participation is appreciated. I will ask you some questions, please remember that you don’t have to answer anything that makes you feel uncomfortable”.

Proposed Interview questions:

- 1) Tell me about yourself
- 2) Tell me about your life growing up
- 3) How do you see your family’s role in your pursuit of higher education?
- 4) How would you describe your doctorate journey? Please take yourself back to the actual time and place as you remember it and share specific details.
- 5) How did you navigate your doctoral journey?
- 6) Is there anything else that you would like to share with me that I did not ask?

Thank you for sharing your experience with me.

## APPENDIX E

### SAMPLE PEER DEBRIEFER

One of the strategies used to ensure the rigor of research findings was the peer debriefer. Teh dissertation chair, Dr. Jia Wang, served in this role. Immediately following an interview with a participant, I summarized the interview and added personal observations and reflections. I then shared that debriefing with Dr. Wang via email. Below is an example.

**From:** Mary Gonzalez [mailto:mary.gonzalez@tamuk.edu]

**Sent:** Monday, October 10, 2011 5:14 PM

**To:** Jia Wang

**Subject:** Second Interview

Hello Jia,

I would like to send you some information that may help me in thinking about my interviews as I gather information for my data.

Logistics: I drove to Houston, Texas to interview my second candidate. She is 35 years old and is working as a post doc at [REDACTED]. I interviewed her at her home. The interview went a lot longer I think it was almost 70 minutes long. She was very descriptive and talked a lot about how she cannot believe where she is now. I asked her a few follow up questions just to make sure she shared as much as she wanted.

Sounds like this is a good interview.

Do you feel that you had got some good data, rich data, or stories?

Did you ask the same questions as you did in the first interview? Or you modified the questions?

What lessons did you learn from the first interviews so far?

General Reaction:

I think this interview went very well. I don't know if it was because she referred to "La Carreta" which is like a cart---which is where she was from when she came over from Mexico at the age of 12. She kind of kept this reference throughout the interview. She states " I kept thinking Wow look at what I am doing and I was from "La Carreta" an extremely poor area in Texas close to the Mexican border. At one point I thought she was laughing and she excused herself and I realized she was crying because she couldn't believe that she got her doctorate 2 years ago. She stated it was so surreal. She felt her support from the McNair program was vital to introduce her to a world outside of her knowledge and her family. She felt her experiences were still unfolding and her life was good because of her drive to keep on going. She loves research.

I like your description above.

I did hear her say that her experience upon entering college was terrible as she got into a migrant program to assist her in her first year and the people in the library made comments in front of her about Mexicans who get free books. She thought how ugly that I got good grades, learned Spanish (though she still has a heavy accent ) and look how I am treated. I earned the right to be here. She left after the first year and went to [REDACTED] and felt so much more comfortable around people who looked like her and the support.

She loves her 7 year old daughter and feels that she has paved the path for her to be in ballet, soccer and the best that she as a parent and her husband can offer. She attributes her years in her journey as a success due to her early support as an undergraduate and her husband who told her to keep going no more what.

Good information above.

I started thinking about this interview compared to the first and I didn't indicate on the memo but both of these students did not feel comfortable at big schools and really attributed their success to support from family and their undergraduate surroundings and support. Just a thought....

That's interesting observation. Where did the program fit in in their success story? Did you ask that question?

Thanks Mary

Mary L. Gonzalez

**APPENDIX F**

**MEMBER CHECKING PROTOCOL AND EXAMPLE**

Hello, Participant

Thank you again for your willingness and participation in the study. You provided some extremely helpful information. I have attached your interview transcript for you to review to ensure that I have captured all information correctly during my interview with you on \_\_\_\_\_.

Please review the following attached transcript and send me a reply email to ensure you are comfortable and that all information is accurate. In addition, please indicate if you need clarification on any part of the transcript and/or if you have any questions. Thank you and I will await your reply.

Sincerely,

Maria L. Gonzalez, Doctoral Student, Texas A&M University

## APPENDIX G

## RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

Sunday December 18, 2011

Today I immersed myself in all the interviews and went back & forth and highlighted different quotes that appeared in each interview that fit together.

Since I listened to all the interviews twice I thought I knew them.

BOY! WOW! It is now 2:45 a.m. and started at about 5:30 pm with breaks here & there. don't feel good about created categories because I have a lot of them. So many notecards going to bed now come back to it.

March 8, 2012

Very overwhelmed I need a few hours is what my thoughts were and I have been up all night several days.

As indicated by my chair I need to step away from it and come one chapter at a time. I need to review my transcripts and revisit my major themes.

I am also going to conduct a reiteration of data.



## APPENDIX H

### DATA ANALYSIS NOTE CARDS

Below is a photo of index cards used for data analysis. Each unit of data was cut from transcribed interviews and pasted on an index card, with an index number on each card.



## **VITA**

Address: Mary Lou Gonzalez  
 MSC 181, Kingsville, TX 78363  
 Email: kamlp00@tamuk.edu  
 Education: Bachelor of Business Administration, Management  
 Texas A&M University-Kingsville, 1989  
  
 Bachelor of Business Administration, Finance  
 Texas A&M University-Kingsville, 1990  
  
 Master of Science, Psychology  
 Texas A&M University-Kingsville, 1997

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs, Special Programs  
 Division of Student Affairs, Texas A&M University-Kingsville (2002-present)

Director, Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, Student Support Services  
 Division of Student Affairs, Texas A&M University-Kingsville (1995-2002)

Coordinator, Residential Programs for Pre College and Freshmen  
 Division of Student Affairs, Texas A&M University-Kingsville (1995-2002)

Visiting Lecturer, Communication, Organizational Management  
 Coastal Bend College (1992-1995)

Consultant, Training Grant for New Directors federal funding  
 Penn State University, U.S. Department of Education,  
 Training Grant for Professionals (2000-2004)

## **HONORS**

“Be All That You Can Be” Women’s Award, Texas A&M University-Kingsville,  
 2011  
 Staff of the Year, 2000, Texas A&M University

## **PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS**

Academy of Human Resource Development, 2012, Panel Presentation.  
 Numerous Presentations with U.S. Department of Education, 1995-present